

False starts

What the UK's growing NEETs problem really looks like, and how to fix it

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October 2025



Acknowledgements

This work is supported by the Health Foundation, an independent charitable organisation working to build a healthier UK.

The authors thanks Sam Atwell and David Finch of the Health Foundation for their support with this report. Many thanks also to colleagues at the Resolution Foundation for their guidance, in particular Mike Brewer, Adam Corlett, Ruth Curtice and Gregory Thwaites. All errors remain, of course, the authors' own.

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J Diniz & L Murphy, *False starts : What the UK's growing NEETs problem really looks like, and how to fix it*, Resolution Foundation, October 2025

<https://doi.org/10.63492/kvz546>

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Summary

In 2025, the topic of NEETs (young people not in education, employment or training) is back in the headlines. Like in the late 2000s, the number of young people aged 16-24 who are NEET has risen to just short of a million. At the Labour Party Conference last month, the Chancellor announced a beefed-up 'Youth Guarantee' in response, offering persistently unemployed young people a guaranteed paid work placement. While this is a step in the right direction, it will only scratch the surface of the problem, reaching an estimated 43,000 young people – just one-in-twenty NEETs. A more expansive policy agenda is needed. In this briefing note, we set out the scale of the problem and document the key contributors to the rising number of NEETs, before moving on to policy measures that would genuinely shift the dial and help young people successfully transition into work or study.

There are almost a million NEETs aged 16-24, but only just over half of them are on benefits

The official estimate of the number of 16-24-year-olds not in work or study is approaching one million, but there are good reasons to think that the Labour Force Survey (LFS) – the survey that sits behind the official NEETs estimate – might be wrong. LFS sample sizes remain well below their pre-pandemic levels, and only one-in-seven responses for 16-24-year-olds are from young people themselves, as opposed to proxy responses or imputed data. To validate the trends seen in the LFS, we examine administrative data sources covering young people's employment and education and we find a similar trend. Reassuringly, our alternative estimate paints a similar picture: we estimate that the number of NEETs aged 16-24 has risen sharply (by 195,000) between 2022-23 and 2024-25 to reach 940,000, reflecting falling labour-market participation and stalling education participation. So we can be fairly certain that the number of NEETs is high and rising, and this is an issue worthy of policy attention.

Reducing the number of NEETs would both improve young people's living standards, and also increase the supply of labour to the economy. But policy makers are also interested for another reason: they hope to cut welfare spending by reducing the number of young people receiving out-of-work benefits. Indeed, discussions of this topic often treat NEETs and young benefit claimants as one and the same group. It's true that out-of-work benefit claims among young people are on the rise: between 2019 and 2024, the number of 16-24-year-olds in the UK who are receiving Universal Credit (or equivalent) while out of work has risen from 430,000 to 530,000 – a rise of 24 per cent. But nearly half (44 per cent) of NEETs do not engage with the benefits system. This raises the tricky question of how to design effective policy to engage with NEETs who have no reason to be in contact with the state.

Before fixing the UK's NEET problem, we need to understand who these young people really are

In 2025, three-fifths of NEETs are inactive – that is, not looking for work – rather than unemployed. This marks a big shift from the early 2010s when unemployment was the main reason. Still, we should not forget that two-in-five NEETs are actively looking for work but unable to find it.

But the bigger shift over time has been in the *composition* of this inactive group. The proportion of NEETs who are inactive due to sickness or disability has more than doubled since 2005, reaching more than a quarter (28 per cent) of all NEETs in 2025, while the proportion who are inactive due to 'other' reasons (which includes those who are inactive for reasons other than health and caring responsibilities, including those who do not want or need employment) also rose sharply during the same period to reach 23 per cent of all NEETs in 2025.

At the same time, the share of young people inactive due to caring reasons dropped drastically, from 29 per cent of NEETs in 2005 to just 10 per cent in 2025. This was driven by young women, whose reasons for worklessness now look more like men's. Indeed, while this big reduction in inactivity for caring reasons led to a welcome fall in women's NEET rate during the 2010s, the picture now looks much less positive, with inactivity for health and 'other' reasons rising for both young men and women.

NEET trends differ by age as well as sex. The rise in economic inactivity due to ill health is mostly seen among 18-24-year-olds (rising from 12 per cent of all NEETs in this age group in 2005, to 30 per cent in 2025), while there has been only a moderate change among 16-17-year-olds. Meanwhile, those aged 16-17 are especially likely to be inactive for 'other' reasons – over the past three years this was the case for almost half (44 per cent) of 16-17-year-olds, compared to only a fifth of those aged 18-24. Notably, while all young people aged 16-17 in England must participate in education or training following the Rising Participation Age (RPA) legislation introduced in 2013, their NEET rates haven't budged, fluctuating between 4 and 5 per cent in both 2013 and 2025.

And despite concern about graduate employment prospects, it is *lower-qualified* young people who continue to have the highest NEET rates. Rates for graduates aged 22-24 remain relatively low, and stable, at around 10 per cent throughout the past two decades. In contrast, NEET rates for 22-24-year-olds who hold a highest qualification that is at GCSE level or below have a NEET rate that is three-times as high (30 per cent).

Low qualifications aren't the only thing that are holding NEETs back from entering work or study, though. NEETs are also more likely than other young people to experience both mental- and physical-health problems, and to report lower wellbeing. And NEETs are

increasingly detached from the labour market, as the share who have looked for paid work in the past month has been steadily decreasing over the past decade. At the same time, a growing proportion of have never had a paid job: 60 per cent of NEETs have never worked in 2025, up from 42 per cent in 2005. Altogether, this paints a worrying picture, of young people who face real, complex barriers to entering work or study.

Headwinds are likely to push up future NEET rates

The picture in 2025 is already bad, but it could get worse, for two reasons. First, there has been a rise in childhood risk factors for being NEET. Almost a quarter of children aged 11-16 now have a probable mental-health disorder; one-in-five secondary school pupils are persistently absent from school; and one-in-six secondary school pupils receive special educational needs (SEN) support. Without a drastic improvement in the support available for young people with health problems and disability, and better pathways for those with low levels of qualifications, these trends indicate that our next generation of 16-24-year-olds will have a heightened NEET risk.

Second, recent Government policy may have worsened young people's employment chances. This April's increase in employer National Insurance contributions and bumper minimum wage rise meant that labour costs rose especially fast for young workers. This now looks to be having an impact on the labour market: employment and vacancies are falling most sharply in youth-heavy sectors of the economy. For example, while the total number of vacancies has fallen by 17 per cent over the last year, there were falls of 20 per cent in hospitality and 25 per cent in the arts, entertainment and recreation (both of which employ above-average shares of young people).

So what should policy makers do if they want to truly decrease the number of NEETs? The big differences between NEETs aged 16-17 and those aged 18-24 suggests that age-specific interventions will be necessary – we set out our policy recommendations below.

For 16-17-year-olds, mandatory participation must be better enforced

At age 16-17, young people reach a crossroads in the education system, leading many to disengage. Local authorities in England have a legal duty to track, contact and support NEETs aged 16-17 – but these duties are weakly monitored and enforced, with limited repercussions for failure. Despite these legal duties, NEET rates (including 'not known') for this age group vary substantially across England, from 1 per cent in Barnet and 1.6 per cent in Ealing, to 15.1 per cent in Northumberland and 21.5 per cent in Dudley.

To reduce NEET rates among 16-17-year-olds, policy makers should focus both on the retention of young people in education and on the re-engagement of those who fall out of the system. First, by strengthening tracking systems to help identify NEETs and

those at risk earlier, to allow prompt re-engagement and to prevent young people from being NEET in the first place. Second, by creating a national 'front door' for young people, providing them a clear route back into education, employment or training. Third, by monitoring how long it takes local authorities to track, contact, and offer suitable provision to young people once they are identified as NEET, to improve accountability and drive more consistent performance across local areas. Finally, by drawing lessons from how duties placed on local authorities in adult social care are structured. In that system, an independent commission monitors local authority performance through monitoring, inspections and ratings, with enforcement actions being taken when services are at risk. Local authorities' responsibilities to NEETs should be treated as just as important as those in adult social care.

For 18-24-year-olds, the Youth Guarantee should be bigger and bolder

This Government's Youth Guarantee is a step in the right direction. It will offer young people (aged 18-21) access to training, an apprenticeship or support to find work, and those who are long-term unemployed and claiming benefits will be offered a guaranteed work placement. This work guarantee is welcome, since we know that young people are far more likely to escape being NEET by moving into work than into study: 78 per cent of those who escape being NEET do so by moving into work.

But we think the Government should be more ambitious. First, it should widen the Youth Guarantee to 22-24-year-olds. There are just as many NEETs aged 22-24 as aged 18-21 and their composition is similar, so any credible policy response aimed at reducing NEET rates should consider 22-24-year-olds just as much as 18-21-year-olds. Second, it should offer equal support through the Youth Guarantee to all young people, regardless of whether they are claiming out-of-work benefits. This is spending money now to save later, given that the scarring impact that spells of worklessness can have on young people's futures. DWP should make the most of having secured a sizeable increase in funding for employment support over the rest of the decade (an extra £300 million was announced in June this year, as part of an unsuccessful attempt to sweeten the Government's ill-fated PIP cuts) and prioritise spending on young people aged 18-24.

The Government should also re-think its proposed changes to health benefits for young people aged under 22 and instead undertake more ambitious changes to the benefits system that will actually reduce NEET numbers. Barring young people under 22 from receiving the health element of UC would be the wrong policy change focused on the wrong age group, and is unlikely to make a substantial dent to either NEET numbers or benefit spending: there are 100,000 young people aged 16-21 claiming UC-Health, representing just one-in-ten NEETs; meanwhile, the 120,000 22-24-year-olds claiming UC-Health, and the 230,000 young people aged 16-24 who are unemployed and claiming

UC, would be unaffected by this change. Instead of undertaking this arbitrary age-based restriction, the Government should have a positive ambition to make UC work better for *all* young people by increasing the quality and frequency of Work Capability Assessments for young people on UC-Health and increasing the work search requirements placed on young jobseekers.

Finally, the Government should proceed carefully with measures that add to the costs of employing younger workers. The pattern of job losses in lower-paying sectors, where young workers are concentrated, is consistent with an adverse impact from bumper increases to minimum wage rates, combined with the increase to Employer National Insurance Contributions (NICs), over the past year. Our view is that this Government's should not proceed with its commitment to abolish so-called 'discriminatory' youth rates, and that sharp rises would be ill-advised in the current economic environment and risk making it even harder for young people to get a foot into the labour market. We would encourage the Government to progress slowly and carefully, placing weight on these potential disemployment effects.

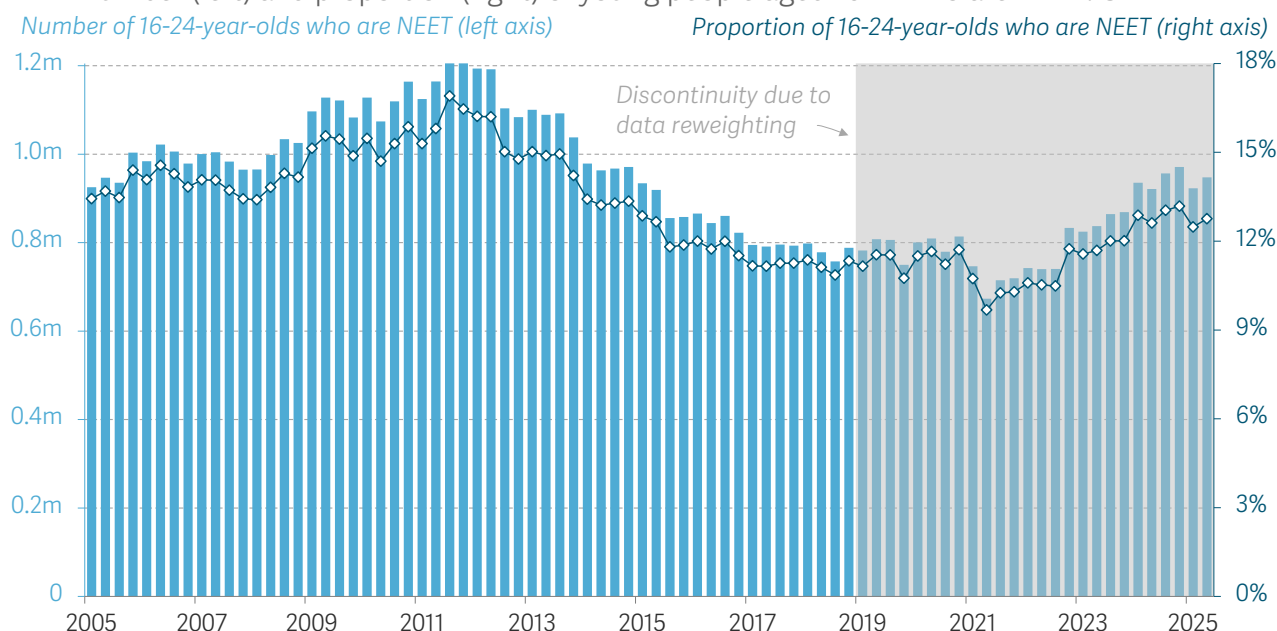
The upcoming Budget looks set to include more details about – and funding for – the Government's Youth Guarantee. This policy attention on NEETs is welcome: close to a million young people are not in work or study, and they deserve more support to both improve their living standards now and boost their career prospects in the future. But it is important that the Youth Guarantee is not narrowly focused on 18-21-year-olds, or just on those NEETs who are claiming benefits. Instead, a wider NEETs policy is needed: one that properly enforces education or training participation among 16-17-year-olds, and offers all 18-24-year-olds, even those who are not claiming benefits, the support they need to move into good-quality work or study.

There are almost a million NEETs aged 16-24

In 2025, NEETs (young people not in education, employment or training) is once again a hot topic.¹ The reason for this is clear: like in the late 2000s, the number of young people aged 16-24 who are NEET is rising and now stands just short of a million. According to the official ONS statistics, it reached 948,000 in April-June 2025, up by 140,000 (or 17 per cent) compared to the same period in 2019.² By 2025, more than one-in-eight young people were NEET (12.8 per cent), up from one-in-nine (11.5 per cent) in 2019. This is shown in Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1: According to official data, there are now almost a million NEETs – equivalent to one-in-eight young people aged 16-24

Number (left) and proportion (right) of young people aged 16-24 who are NEET: UK



SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Not in Education, Employment or Training ('NEET') data.

While NEET numbers approaching one million increases the chances of this issue making headlines, there are other good reasons for policy makers to be interested in this trend. NEET numbers have certainly exceeded a million in the past, but this has not been true since the aftermath of the financial crisis, when the UK unemployment rate was much higher. The number of NEETs reached a high of 1.2 million in 2011, but fell consistently for the rest of the decade, reaching a pre-pandemic low of 750,000 in 2019. The recent rise in NEET numbers is concerning because it undoes a decade's worth of progress: NEET levels in 2025 have returned to where they were in 2015.

¹ See, for example: BBC, ['I've applied for hundreds of jobs': One in eight youths not in work or education](#), 23 May 2025; R Partington, [UK faces youth jobs crisis as number of 'neets' rises to almost 1m](#), The Guardian, 27 February 2025; C Hymas, [Almost a million young Britons idle as migrant workforce soars](#), The Telegraph, 23 August 2025; ; P Hyman, [The education divide that's fuelling populism](#), Changing the Story Substack, September 2025.

² ONS, [Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\), UK: August 2025](#).

Our NEETs series based on administrative data confirms that the number of NEETs is high and rising

Given recent concerns about the LFS (see Annex 1), we create an alternative NEETs series by combining administrative data sources covering young people's employment and education. The main data sources and the methodology for our alternative NEETs series, are set out in more detail in Annex 1.

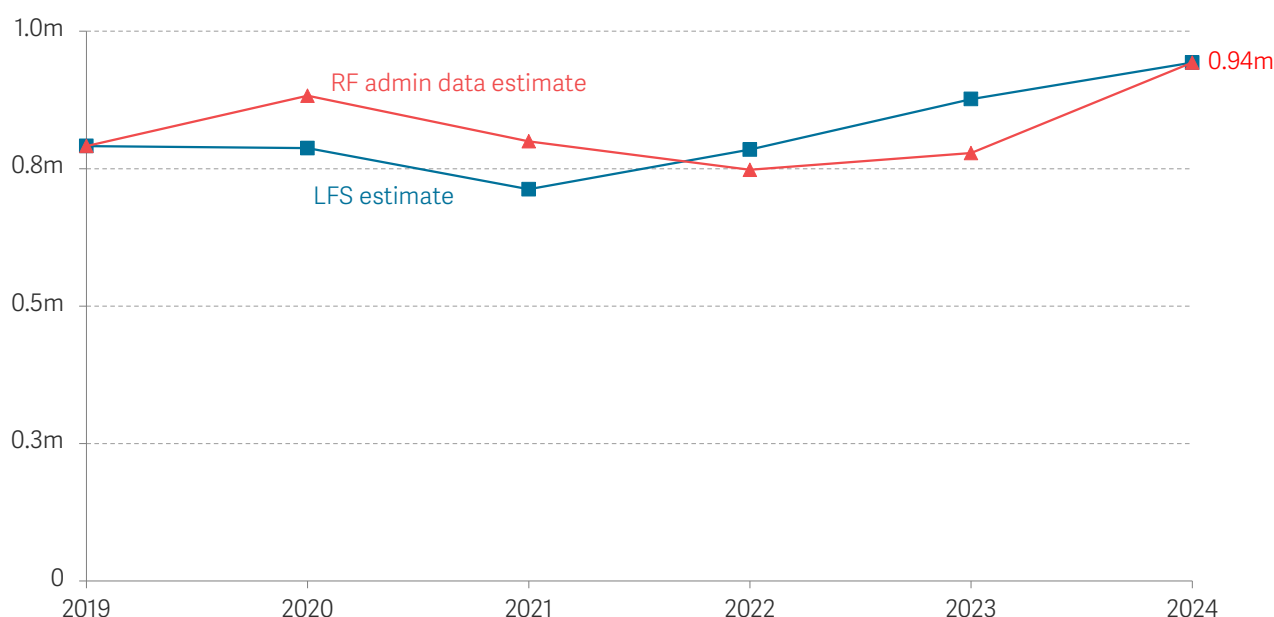
We find a very similar trend to that seen in the LFS. NEET numbers dipped considerably during and immediately after the Covid-19 pandemic, reflecting young people's tendency to 'shelter' from pandemic-related economic uncertainty by entering, or staying in, education.³ Indeed, the number of UK students aged 16-24 enrolled in university courses rose by 5.3 per cent between the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years (compared to much smaller increases, of just 0.5 per cent and 0.4 per cent, in the preceding two academic years).⁴ But since then, our NEET estimate shows a similar picture to the LFS, with the number of NEETs rising sharply between 2022-23 and 2024-25. We estimate that the number of NEETs has risen by more than a quarter (up by 26 per cent, or 195,000) over the past two years to reach 940,000 in 2024-25. Our NEETs series gives an almost identical NEETs figure to the number implied by the official ONS NEETs data, which also has the number of NEETs reaching 940,000 in 2024-25. This is shown in Figure 2.

³ For a discussion of young people 'sheltering' during financial downturns, see: K Henahan, [Class of 2020: Education leavers in the current crisis](#), Resolution Foundation, May 2020.

⁴ Source: RF analysis of HESA, [Who's studying in HE?](#)

FIGURE 2: Our NEET estimate, based on administrative data, also shows a rise in NEET numbers in recent years

Number of 16-24-year-olds who are NEET, using the official LFS data and the RF admin data estimate: UK



SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Not in Education, Employment or Training ('NEET') data; various administrative data sources (see Annex 1).

This rise in the number of NEETs reflects two things. First, labour market participation among young people has been falling since 2022-23. In the latest data from August 2025, there were 3.80 million young people aged 16-24 in payrolled employment, down from 3.98 million three years earlier in August 2022, a fall of 178,000 (or 4.5 per cent). Second, after fast increases during the Covid-19 pandemic, increases in education participation have started to slow. In fact, between 2022/23 and 2023/24, the number of UK students aged 16-24 enrolled in a university course did not increase at all, levelling off at 1.37 million in both years. (Of course, over the past few years there has been a marked increase in the number of *non-UK* students enrolled in UK universities. When making sense of trends in young people's education participation, it is important to be clear about the impact that migration is having, and so we summarise the key trends – both in the past few years, and the projected impact over the rest of the decade – in Box 1 below.)

BOX 1: The impact of migration on NEET rates

There has been a sharp uptick in migration to the UK since the pandemic, in part driven by students.

Student migration reached a record high in 2022, with 480,000 study visas issued, up from 269,000 in 2019.⁵ This

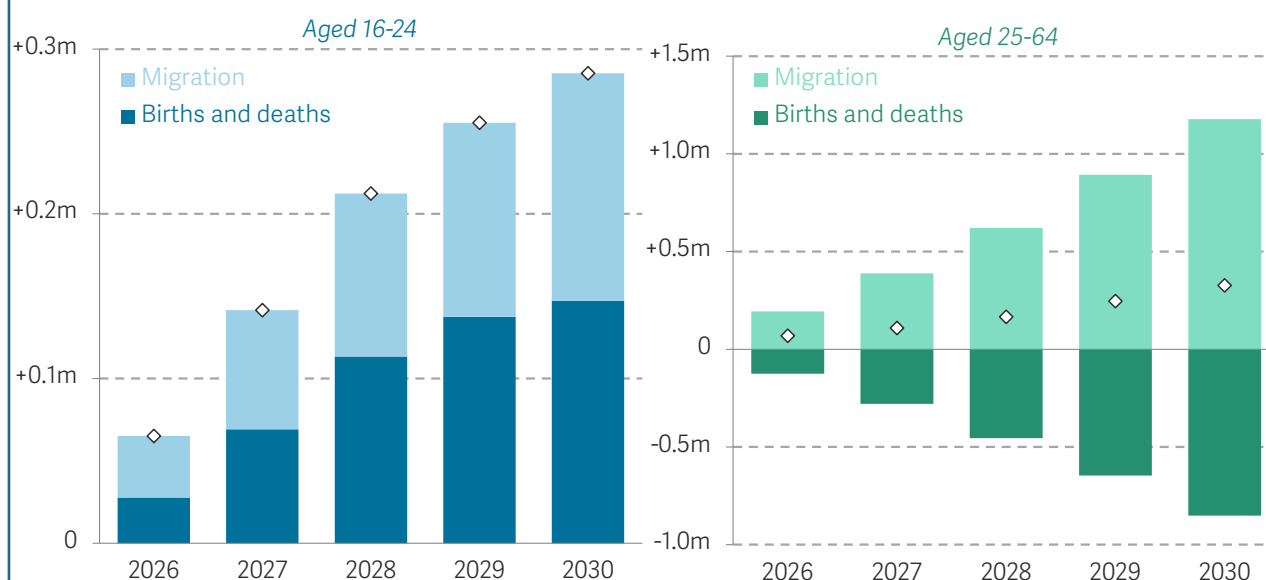
⁵ The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, [Student migration to the UK](#), January 2024.

is important to bear in mind when tracking the NEET *rate* over time: although young non-UK students will not be counted as NEETs (by virtue of being in education), they should form part of the base population of 16-24-year-olds living in the UK. Although non-UK students will not be perfectly captured in the LFS (those living in halls of residence will not be covered at all, and there is evidence that suggests the LFS under-records non-UK-born residents⁶), at least some non-UK students who live in private households will be included in the LFS.

Over the rest of the decade, the size of the 16-24 population is set to increase, with demographic changes (an increased birth rate in the late 2000s and early 2010s) and increased migration both playing a part (see Figure 3). The fact that the 16-24 population faces upwards pressure on both fronts is important and different to the story for the older working-age population: for 25-64-year-olds, it is only migration that is contributing to the expected increase in the population by 2030.

FIGURE 3: The number of 16-24-year-olds is set to increase by 2030, reflecting both birth rates and migration

Projected increase in the 16-24 population (left) and 25-64 population (right) between 2025 and 2030, by contribution from migration and births and deaths: UK



SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, National population projections: 2022-based.

⁶ See Figure 1 in: A Corlett, *Get Britain's Stats Working: Exploring alternatives to Labour Force Survey estimates*, Resolution Foundation, November 2024.

This is important when thinking about NEET trends over time. If the number of non-UK students aged 16-24 continues to increase, and at least some of these young people are captured in our surveys, then this will likely push *down* on NEET *rates* over time. Relatedly, even if our migration pattern is unchanged, if the LFS survey coverage improves in coming years (e.g. due to the rollout of the new online-first Transformed Labour

Force Survey⁷) and is better able to capture young migrants to the UK, this could also push down on NEET rates.

It is therefore important that policy makers interested in properly understanding NEET trends track both the *number* and *proportion* of young people who are NEET, and corroborate trends in the LFS with those seen in administrative data.

We can say with a high degree of certainty, then, that the number of NEETs is high and rising. This is clearly an issue worthy of policy makers' attention: taking action to reduce the number of NEETs would be beneficial for young people and our wider economy, both now and in the long term.

Benefit claims are rising – but this is only part of the NEETs picture

But young people's living standards and economic growth are not the only reasons that politicians and commentators are interested in the rising number of NEETs. Another area of focus is the number of young people receiving out-of-work benefits, since it is often presumed that rising NEET levels directly translate into higher benefit claims. Indeed, last month the Prime Minister suggested just this when he spoke of "a million young people who are on benefits".⁸ But although it is true that the number of young people claiming out-of-work benefits is on the rise, not all of the one million NEETs are in this position.

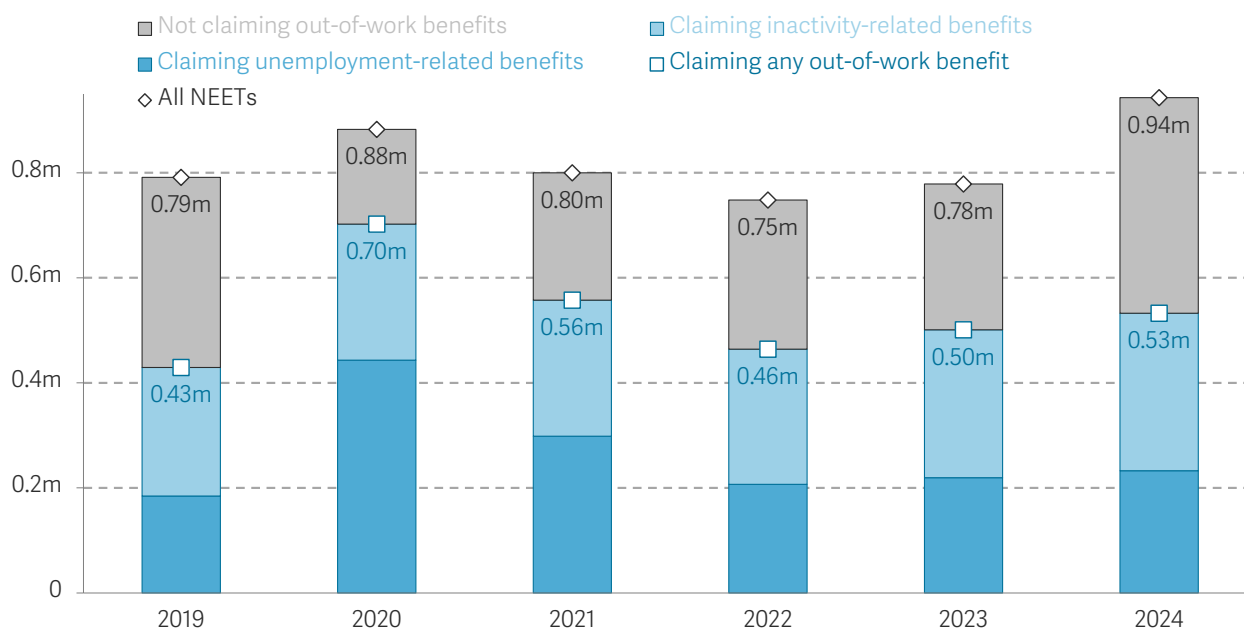
As shown in Figure 4, the number of young people aged 16-24 claiming an out-of-work benefit stood at 530,000 in 2024, up from 460,000 two years earlier in 2022 (a rise of 68,000, or 15 per cent). There are slightly more young people claiming out-of-work benefits relating to economic inactivity than unemployment: by 2024, 56 per cent of young out-of-work benefit claimants received an inactivity-related benefit, while 44 per cent received an unemployment-related benefit. But both types of benefit claims are on the rise: between 2022 and 2024, claims relating to unemployment rose by 13 per cent and claims relating to inactivity rose by 16 per cent. Of course, we shouldn't blow this out of proportion: claimants aged 16-24-year-olds represents just a tenth (11 per cent) of all out-of-work benefit claimants aged 16-64, with rising NEET numbers being far from the only upwards pressure on the benefits bill.

⁷ ONS, [Labour market transformation – update on progress and plans](#): July 2025.

⁸ H Taylor, [Starmer issues benefits warning for young people with mental illnesses](#), Independent, October 2025, accessed 14 October 2025.

FIGURE 4: Benefit claims among young people are on the rise – but almost half of NEETs are not claiming out-of-work benefits

Estimated number of young people aged 16-24 who are NEET, by benefit receipt: UK



SOURCE: RF analysis of DWP, Stat-xplore; various administrative data sources (see Annex 1).

But what Figure 4 also shows is that there are consistently hundreds of thousands of young NEETs who are *not* claiming out-of-work benefits. In 2024, we estimate that 410,000 – 44 per cent of all NEETs – were not in receipt of an out-of-work benefit.⁹ This is a slightly lower proportion than in 2019, and we estimate that the number of NEETs who are claiming out-of-work benefits has risen more quickly since 2019 than the number who are NEET and not claiming (with increases of 24 per cent and 13 per cent respectively).

The fact that welfare spending is lower than it could be if all NEETs claimed an out-of-work benefit may seem like good news to some policy makers, but it also highlights a policy dilemma – how can we reach and support NEETs who have little incentive or opportunity to engage with the state?

⁹ In Figure 5, we use administrative data to estimate the proportion of NEETs who are claiming benefits. Similar results are found when analysing survey data. For example, see research using the Annual Population Survey: Learning and Work Institute, *The Youth Guarantee and the benefits system*, September 2025. For research using the Family Resources Survey, see Figure 27 in: L Murphy, *Not working: Exploring changing trends in youth worklessness in the UK, from the 1990s to the Covid-19 pandemic*, Resolution Foundation, June 2022.

The UK faces a dual problem: stubborn youth unemployment, and a changing pattern of youth economic inactivity

Before considering potential policy responses, it is important to first understand who are the young people that are not in education, employment or training in the UK.¹⁰ NEET status captures a range of circumstances young people are faced with: from those who are in between jobs, to those who are longer-term economically inactive due to health and caring responsibilities, or other reasons unrelated to these. In this section, we examine how NEETs are distributed across these categories, and how their composition varies by age and gender. We also explore some of the specific barriers many NEETs face, including low qualification levels, limited work experience and poor health, all of which shape their prospects for re-engagement.

Unemployment remains the most common, yet steady reason for being NEET...

Although the share of young people who are unemployed has fallen since 2011, most of this improvement happened in the early-mid 2010s, with unemployment stalling since then. The 16-24-year-old unemployment rate fell from 20.3 per cent in early 2011 to just 11.0 per cent in early 2019. But since then, unemployment has ticked up, reaching 14.2 per cent in early 2025.¹¹ Among NEETs, the share who were unemployed fell substantially from 56 per cent in 2011 to 44 per cent in 2017; but then levelled off from 2017 onwards. By 2025, after the bumpy Covid-19 period, a similar proportion of NEETs are unemployed (40 per cent), underscoring unemployment among NEETs to have remained steady for much of the past decade.

Over the same period, the share of young people who are economically inactive (for reasons other than being a student) has risen persistently. The proportion of all young people aged 16-24 who are economically inactive and not in full-time education has risen from 9.5 per cent in early 2011 to 10.9 per cent in early 2025.¹² This is reflected in the changing make-up of NEETs: less than half (44 per cent) of NEETs were economically inactive in 2011, but this has risen to three-in-five (60 per cent) in 2025. This shift among NEETs from unemployment to economic inactivity since the financial crisis means that overall, by 2025, we are faced with a dual challenge of stagnant unemployment combined with rising economic inactivity among young people.

¹⁰ Although we use our alternative NEETs series (based on administrative data) to track overall NEET numbers over time, in this section, we use data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) to break down the types of young people who are NEET. NEET young people were identified in the data as those who are unemployed or economically inactive (aside from those who are unemployed while being in full-time education, or who are inactive due to being a student). We make an adjustment to account for young people aged 16-17 who have imputed data that is uncertain (see Office for National Statistics, [Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\)](#), UK, methodology, May 2022).

¹¹ These figures refer to the unemployment rate for all 16-24-year-olds – not the proportion of young people who are NEET and unemployed. Source: RF analysis of ONS, A06: Educational status, economic activity & inactivity of young people.

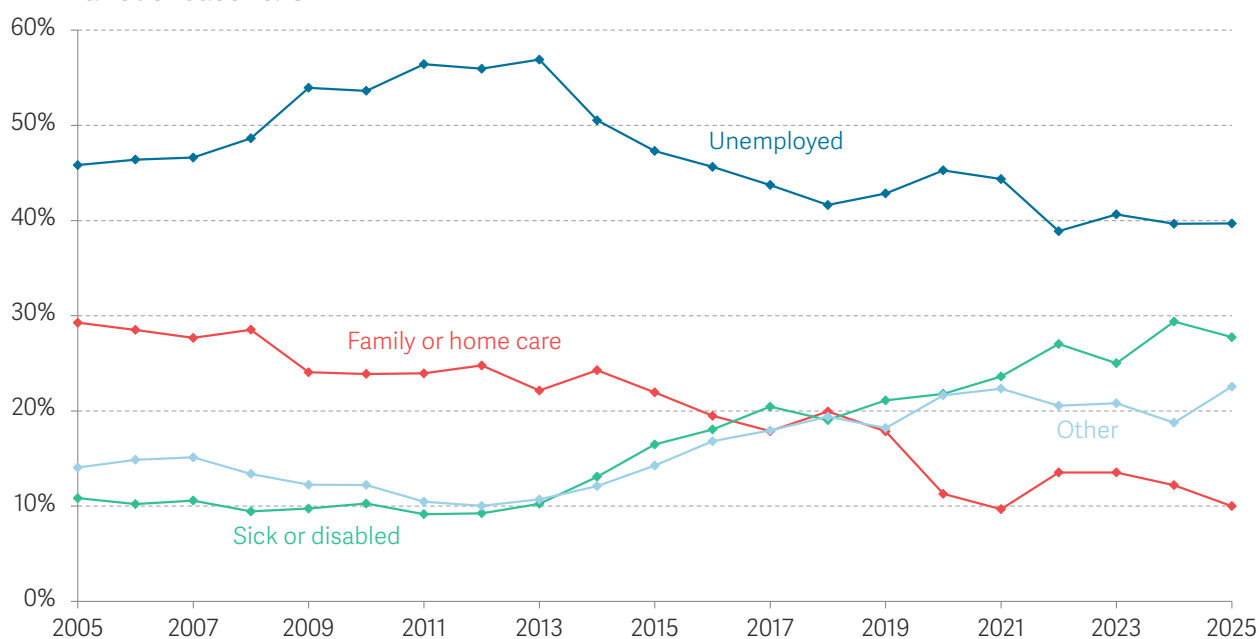
¹² Source: RF analysis of ONS, A06: Educational status, economic activity & inactivity of young people.

...But among those inactive, a growing share of NEETs cite sickness or disability

Although there has been a gradual shift among NEETs from unemployment to inactivity, the more dramatic change has been in the *types* of economic inactivity. Since 2005, the share of NEETs who are inactive due to family or home care reasons has more than halved, as Figure 5 shows. In 2005, 29 per cent of NEET young people were inactive for these reasons, but by 2025, this has fallen to 10 per cent. In turn, Figure 5 shows that the proportions of NEETs inactive due to sickness or disability and 'other' reasons (which includes a range of circumstances, from those feeling discouraged about job prospects to those choosing not to seek work) rose substantially. Most notably, the former increased by 17 percentage points since 2005, rising from 11 per cent to reach almost one third (28 per cent) of young people who are NEET in 2025. Over the same period, NEETs inactive due to 'other' reasons increased by 9 percentage points, also reaching almost one quarter (23 per cent) of young people who are NEET. By 2025, then, economic inactivity due to health-related and 'other' reasons accounts for half (50 per cent) of young people who are NEET. The sharp fall in inactivity due to family and care responsibilities over the past two decades has not been enough to offset the rise in inactivity due to the alternative reasons, contributing to overall increase in the share of NEETs who are economically inactive.

FIGURE 5: Unemployment remains stubbornly high while economic inactivity due to sickness or disability and 'other' reasons is on the rise

Proportion of 16-24-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training for various reasons: UK



NOTES: Data for 2025 refers to quarter 1 only.

SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey

The decline in family and care responsibilities have led the pictures for men and women to look more similar

The decline in family and care responsibilities reflects both a marked shift in reasons for economic inactivity among young women and starkly different trends for men and women over the past two decades. As Figure 6 shows, through the mid-2000s and early 2010s, women had higher NEET rates than men because a far larger share of women were inactive due to family and care responsibilities (in 2005, 12 per cent of young men were NEET compared to 16 per cent of young women). In both 2005 and 2012, 8 per cent of all young women were inactive for caring reasons, compared with virtually no young men. Family and care responsibilities have been a longstanding dominant reason for young women being NEET, accounting for half (50 per cent) of young women who were in NEET in 2005. But the share of young women inactive for this reason has fallen sharply over the past two decades – from 8 per cent of all young women in 2005 to 2 per cent by 2025 (among female NEETs, the share who are inactive for caring reasons has fallen from 50 per cent in 2005 to 19 per cent in 2025). This trend has, unsurprisingly, been almost entirely driven by young mothers, with only modest changes in inactivity seen among young women without children.¹³ This change in economic inactivity among young women has contributed substantially to the overall narrowing and then reversing of the gender gap in NEET rates, where, by 2025, men actually have slightly higher NEET rates than women (13 per cent of young men are NEET, compared to 12 per cent of young women). However, while the decline in inactivity due to family and care responsibilities for women has been a key driver, it is not the only factor behind this shift.

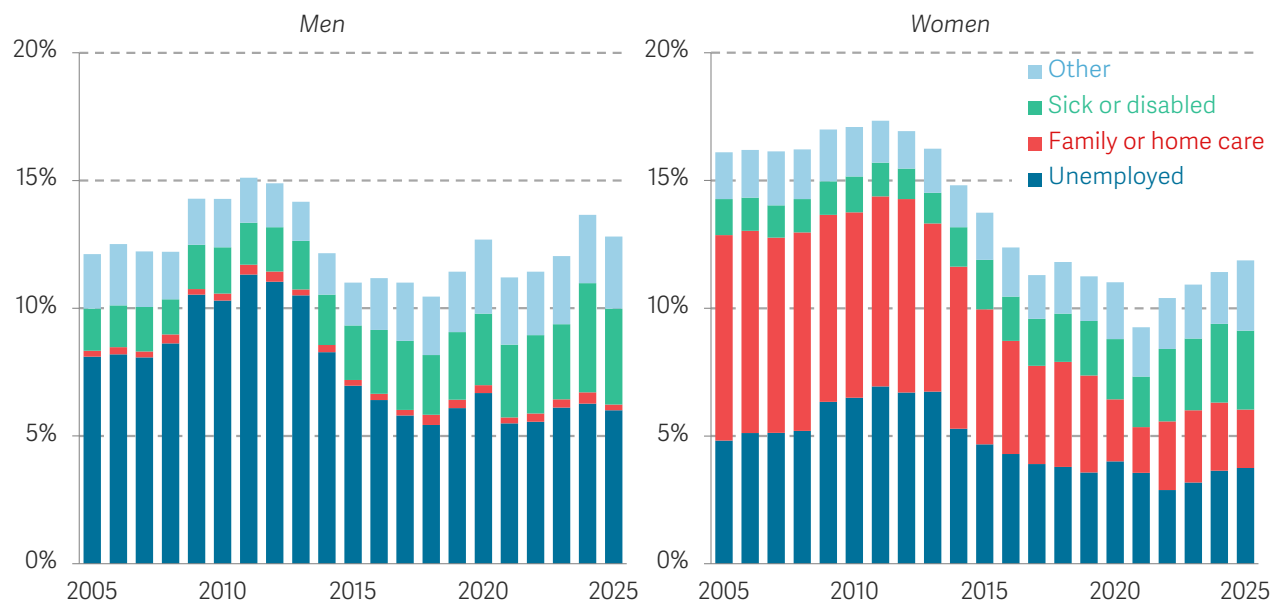
As Figure 6 shows, among all young people, the share who are inactive due to sickness or disability and other reasons has increased over the past two decades for both young men and women. As explored in previous Resolution Foundation work, the share of 16-24-year-olds who are inactive due to sickness or disability doubled between 2005 and 2025 for young men (rising from 2 to 4 per cent) and tripled for young women (rising from 1 to 3 per cent).¹⁴ Over the same period, inactivity due to other reasons has increased by 1 percentage point (from 2 to 3 per cent) for both groups. As a result, the reasons for women being NEET have come to look increasingly similar to those of men, with health-related and other forms of inactivity becoming more common and reaching proportions comparable to men's. Overall then, while the fall in family and care responsibilities marks clear progress among young women, this has been accompanied by rises in other forms of inactivity, meaning that the nature of women's inactivity has shifted rather than diminished.

¹³ See Figure 13 in: L Murphy, *Not working: Exploring changing trends in youth worklessness in the UK, from the 1990s to the Covid-19 pandemic*, Resolution Foundation, June 2022.

¹⁴ C McCurdy & L Murphy, *We've only just begun: Action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment*, Resolution Foundation, February 2024.

FIGURE 6: The gender divide in NEET rates is narrowing as reasons for being NEET become more similar between men and women

Proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training for various reasons, by gender: UK



NOTES: Data for 2025 refer to quarter 1 only.

SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey

NEET rates vary substantially between the younger and older age groups...

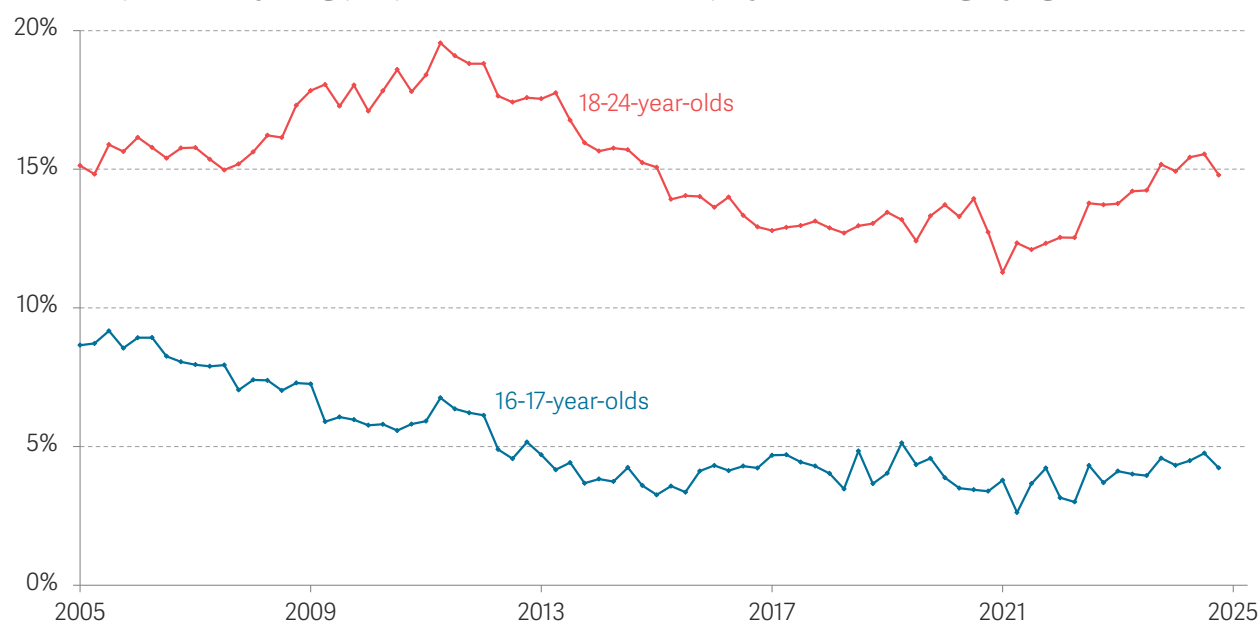
Taken together, the patterns so far point to a reshaping of the NEET population over time, but this only tells part of the story. NEET rates and the reasons young people are NEET also vary markedly by age, with distinct trends for younger and older NEETs.

Among NEETs aged 16-24, 18-24-year-olds make up the majority – 92 per cent in early 2025. Meanwhile, 16-17-year-olds are under-represented, making up just 8 per cent of NEETs in 2025, compared to 22 per cent of the youth population.

Young people in older age groups therefore face a higher risk of being NEET. As Figure 7 shows, the NEET rate among young people aged 18-24 stands at 15 per cent of the youth population in early 2025, compared to a 4.6 per cent NEET rate among 16-17-year-olds.

FIGURE 7: NEET rates are much higher for older age groups than for under 18s

Proportion of young people not in education, employment or training, by age: UK



SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Not in Education, Employment or Training ('NEET') data.

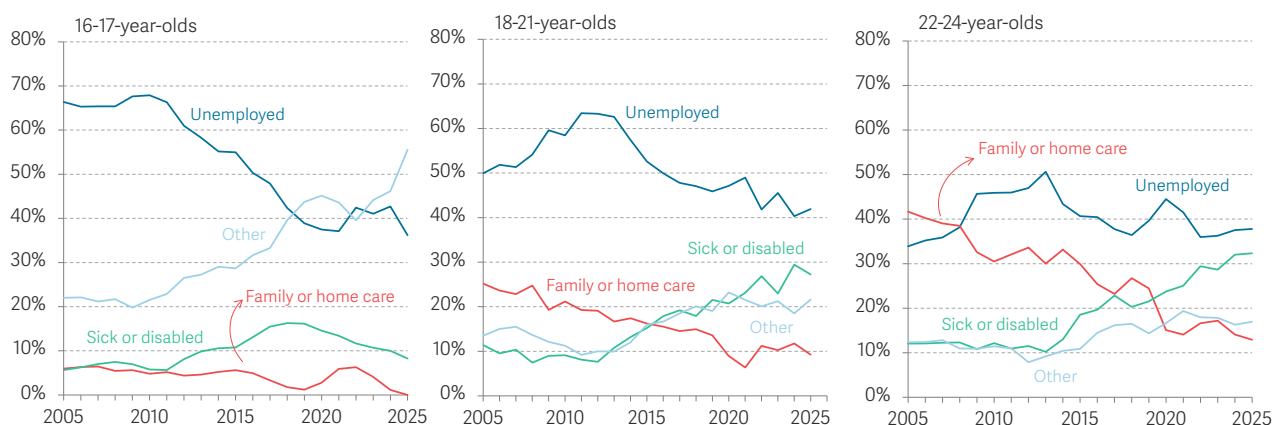
...It is also vital to look at reasons for being NEET for different age groups

Among 16-17-year-olds, the composition of NEETs has shifted away from unemployment towards less-well-defined forms of inactivity. As Figure 8 shows, unemployment fell from 69 to 36 per cent among these young NEETs between 2005 and 2025, but this has been more than offset by a sharp rise in inactivity for 'other' reasons: while this category accounted for one third (21 per cent) of young NEETs in 2005, by 2025 this share rose to 56 per cent. This suggests that the youngest NEETs are increasingly disengaged with education and the labour market for reasons unrelated to active job searches. Though out-numbered among all NEETs, 16-17-year-olds have played a key role in the broader rise in inactivity for 'other' reasons among all NEETs seen in Figure 5.

In contrast, trends among 18-21 and 22-24-year-olds are more similar. Unemployment remains the dominant reason for being NEET, accounting for roughly 40 per cent of NEETs in both groups in 2025. This marks only modest changes over the past two decades as 50 per cent of 18-21-year-olds and 34 per cent of 22-24-year-olds were unemployed in 2005. Like the broader picture for all NEETs in Figure 5, unemployment has remained stubbornly high for these age groups. At the same time, inactivity due to sickness or disability and other reasons has risen substantially over the past two decades. The share inactive due to sickness or disability rose by 16 percentage points between 2005 and 2025 among 18-21-year-olds (from 11 to 27 per cent), and 20 percentage points among 21-22-year-olds (from 12 to 32 per cent). Similarly, those inactive for 'other' reasons rose from 13 to 22 per cent for 18-21-year-olds, and 12 to 17 per cent for 22-24-year-olds.

FIGURE 8: Reasons for being NEET are strikingly different between the younger and older NEETs

Proportion of NEETs in different age groups by reason for being NEET: UK



NOTES: Averages smoothed over 3 years for 16-17-year-olds due to small sample sizes. Data for 2025 refers to quarter 1 only.

SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey

Overall, the key takeaway is that, while we are faced with a youth problem of persistent unemployment combined with rising health-related inactivity, this is primarily affecting 18-24-year-olds. Our youngest NEETs are faced with a new and challenging problem as they are becoming increasingly detached from the labour market for reasons unrelated to health or caring responsibilities.

NEETs face considerable disadvantage in finding good jobs

Young people with low levels of education have the highest NEET risk

While the age patterns highlight that the challenge of disengagement is not uniform, qualification levels is one of the clearest divides in the outcomes of young people.¹⁵ Across all age groups, NEETs are far more likely than all young people to hold GCSEs or below as their highest qualification, and this gap grows with age.

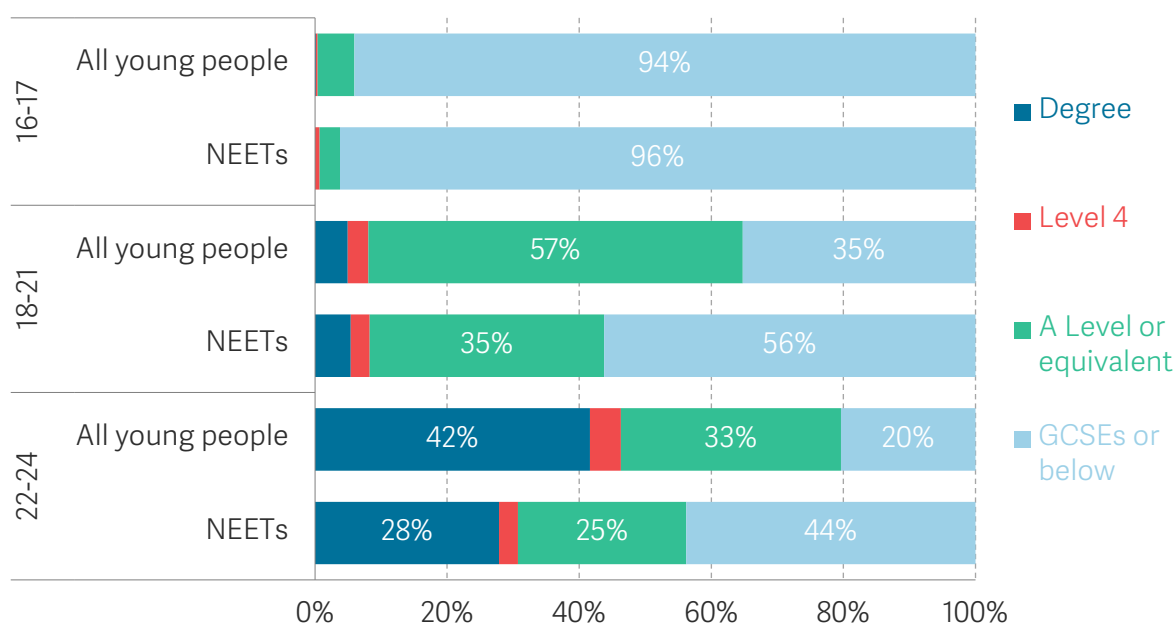
Among 16-17-year-olds, there are only small differences between NEETs and all young people, but this reflects the completion of GCSEs by age 16 under compulsory participation. By age 18-21 years old, however, Figure 9 shows that 56 per cent of NEETs have only GCSEs or below qualifications, compared with 35 per cent of all young people. The divide becomes even starker among 22-24-year-olds, where 44 per cent of NEETs hold only GCSEs or below qualifications compared to 20 per cent of all young people.

¹⁵ B Gadsby, *Research briefing 6: The long-term NEET population*, Impetus, September 2019; H Rahmani & W Groot, Risk factors of being a youth not in education, employment or training (NEET): A scoping review, *International Journal of Educational Research* 120, May 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102198>.

At the other end of the spectrum, fewer than one in three (28 per cent) of NEETs hold a degree compared to over four in ten (42 per cent) of all young people. These qualification gaps, particularly among the older groups, highlight how lower educational attainment is closely linked to a greater risk of being out of work. Our data confirms this as young people aged 22-24 with low qualifications are three times more likely to be NEET than graduates: 30 per cent of those in the age group who hold GCSEs or below as their highest qualification are NEET compared to 9 per cent of graduates. Recent analysis also highlights that young workers without a degree face not only the highest but also the fastest rising rates of worklessness compared to their peers with degrees.¹⁶ This widening divide underscores how low qualifications can trap many young people in a cycle of weaker positions in the labour market, where opportunities for stable, secure and well-paid work remain limited, and low qualifications continue to reinforce these barriers.¹⁷

FIGURE 9: NEETs are far more likely to have low qualifications compared to all young people, and gaps widen with age

Proportion of NEETs and all young people by highest qualification level and age group: UK, 2015-2025



NOTES: Proportions averaged across 2015 to 2025 due to small sample sizes.

SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey

¹⁶ J Burn-Murdoch, *What the graduate unemployment story gets wrong*, Financial Times, October 2025, accessed 10 October 2025.

¹⁷ S Roberts, *No snakes, but no ladders: Young people, employment, and the low skills trap at the bottom of the contemporary service economy*, Resolution Foundation, March 2012.

Other barriers to young people engaging with education and the labour market

While qualifications are key, health is also a well-established barrier to young people engaging with education and the labour market, and one that is becoming increasingly important as a growing share of young people are inactive due to sickness or disability. Previous Resolution Foundation analysis found that living with a health condition increases the odds of becoming NEET. Among men, for example, 10 per cent of those with a health condition move from employment or full-time study into worklessness one year later, compared to 6 per cent of those without.¹⁸

Consistent with this, our data shows that 34 per cent of NEETs report a mental health condition, compared to 21 per cent of the youth population.¹⁹ This is crucial to consider because, aside from increasing the likelihood of becoming NEET, previous Resolution Foundation work found that mental health conditions are also associated with longer spells of worklessness.²⁰ Overall, these patterns suggest that poor health and worklessness are closely linked.

Finally, previous Resolution Foundation analysis shows that young people are increasingly delaying entry into the labour market across cohorts. For those born between 1981-1985, just 38 per cent had never worked by age 17, compared to almost two thirds (65 per cent) of those born between 1996-2000.²¹ Our data shows that, in 2005, 42 per cent of NEETs had never had a job, but by 2025, this has risen to 60 per cent. As Figure 10 Figureshows, this was driven mainly by those aged 18 and over, who also became increasingly unlikely to ever have had a paid job compared to all young people in the same age groups. While some of the increases in Figure 10 may reflect a rising number of young people spending longer in education, it also signals a deeper problem: a rising share of young people are struggling to gain any foothold in the labour market.²² Entering adulthood without any work experience limits opportunities to build skills, confidence and earnings potential, factors that are key to labour market outcomes later in life.

¹⁸ See Figure 20 in: L Murphy, [Not working: Exploring changing trends in youth worklessness in the UK, from the 1990s to the Covid-19 pandemic](#), Resolution Foundation, June 2022.

¹⁹ Based on respondents' reports of a range of long-term mental health conditions. Source: RF analysis of ISER, Understanding Society.

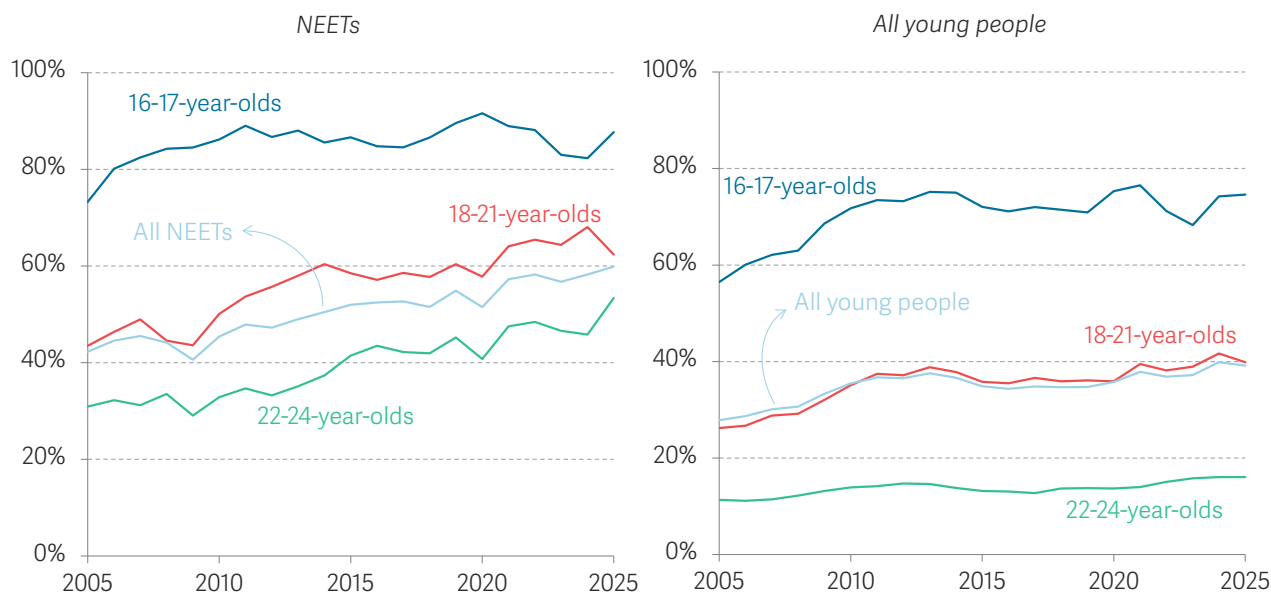
²⁰ C McCurdy & L Murphy, [We've only just begun: Action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment](#), Resolution Foundation, February 2024. For more on the long-term NEET population, see: B Gadsby, [Research briefing 6: The long-term NEET population](#), Impetus, September 2019.

²¹ L Gardiner, [Never ever: Exploring the increase in people who've never had a paid job](#), Resolution Foundation, January 2020.

²² D Finch, [Live long and prosper? Demographic trends and their implications for living standards](#), Resolution Foundation, January 2017; D Willetts, [Are universities worth it? A review of the evidence and policy options](#), Resolution Foundation, January 2025.

FIGURE 10: The proportion of NEETs who have never had a paid job is higher than among all young people, and is on the rise

Proportion of NEETs (left) and all young people (right) who have never had a paid job by age group: UK



NOTES: Data for 2025 refer to quarter 1 only.
SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey.

Taken together, this data, consistent with previous Resolution Foundation analysis, suggests that young people face multiple disadvantages that compound to entrench worklessness.²³ These disadvantages also compound to affect the length of worklessness as recent evidence shows that, while most NEETs face prolonged periods of disengagement, those who face overlapping barriers are far more likely to become long-term NEETs.²⁴ Therefore, low qualifications, poor health, and limited work experience often interact to increase the risk of not just becoming NEET, but also of remaining NEET for longer. This underscores the need for policy responses that recognise the complexity of young people's circumstances and provide tailored support, rather than single-issue interventions. Such an approach can prevent temporary and circumstantial disengagement from becoming a lasting exclusion from education and work that brings long-lasting social and financial consequences.

There are worrying signs of headwinds that will push up NEET rates

The picture right now is clearly far from positive: there are almost a million NEETs, with the number rising by a quarter over the past two years. But there are two worrying headwinds that mean there is a real risk that things will look even worse later this decade.

²³ L Murphy, *Left behind: Exploring the prevalence of youth worklessness due to ill health in different parts of the UK*, Resolution Foundation, June 2023.

²⁴ B Gadsby, *Research briefing 6: The long-term NEET population*, Impetus, September 2019.

1. Key NEET risk factors are becoming more common

Concerningly, many childhood risk factors associated with being NEET in early adulthood are getting more common.²⁵

It is well-documented that an increasing share of children are growing up with a disability: among children aged 11-15 in England, the proportion who are classified as disabled has risen from less than one-in-ten in 2015-16 (9 per cent) to almost one-in-six (16 per cent) in 2023-24. This largely relates to impairments that are social or behavioural, learning-related or mental health-related – the majority of disabled children have one of these types of impairments.²⁶ Among older children, the rise in mental health problems is particularly striking: in 2017, 13 per cent of children aged 11-16 were classified as having a probable mental health disorder, but this had risen to almost a quarter (23 per cent) in 2023.

Relatedly, the proportion of children in England who receive support relating to special educational needs (SEN) is also on the rise; this is true for both primary and secondary school pupils. Among secondary school pupils, the proportion in receipt of SEN support has risen from 13 per cent in 2015/16 to 17 per cent in 2024/25. This reflects both a rise in pupils who receive support via an education, health and care (EHC) plan (up from 2 per cent to 3 per cent), and those who receive SEN support without an EHC plan (up from 11 to 13 per cent).

Finally, the proportion of children who are regularly missing school spiked during the Covid-19 pandemic and remains elevated.²⁷ In 2024/25, one-in-five (21 per cent) of secondary school pupils were persistently absent from school, meaning they missed 10 per cent or more of term time. While down from the 2021/22 peak of 28 per cent, this is still well above the pre-pandemic rate of 13 per cent in 2018/19. And it is even more concerning that the proportion of children who are *severely* absent – meaning they miss 50 per cent or more of term time – is continuing to rise. This peaked at 3 per cent of secondary school pupils in 2024/25, three-times the rate seen before the pandemic in 2018/19 (1 per cent).

These key NEET risk indicators are summarised in Figure 11.

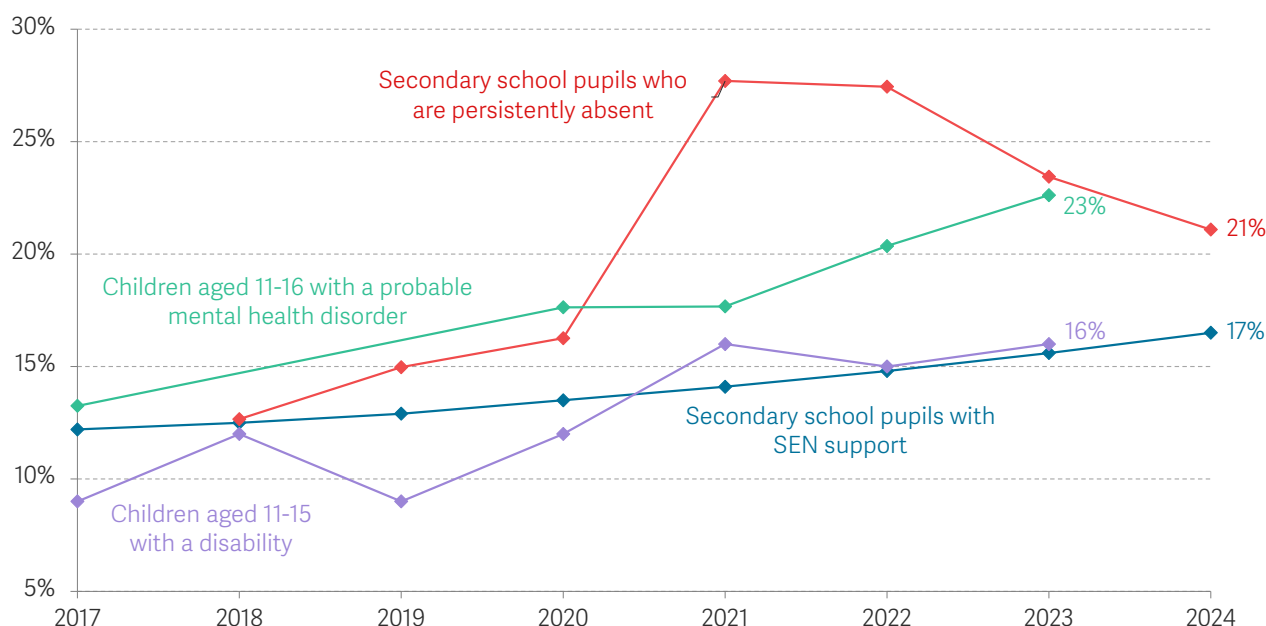
²⁵ For an overview of NEET risk factors, see: J Crowley et al, [Risk factors for being NEET among young people](#), Youth Futures Foundation, December 2023; Department for Education, [Identifying and supporting young people at risk of NEET](#), January 2025. Of course, some NEET risk factors – most notably, pregnancy in early adulthood – are becoming less common. But most of this decline has already happened in the 2010s, so will not offset the impact of the other rising risk factors in the 2020s and beyond. See: L Murphy, [Not working: Exploring changing trends in youth worklessness in the UK, from the 1990s to the Covid-19 pandemic](#), Resolution Foundation, June 2022.

²⁶ L Murphy, [Growing pressures: Exploring trends in children's disability benefits](#), Resolution Foundation, August 2024.

²⁷ See, for example: K Carr, P Whitehead & S Burtonshaw, [Listening to, and learning from, young people in the attendance crisis](#), Impetus and Public First, September 2025.

FIGURE 11: Key NEET risk indicators are on the rise

Proportion of children with various indicators of NEET risk: England



NOTES: School data is for academic years, e.g. 2024/25 rather than 2024, and refers to state-funded schools only.

SOURCE: RF analysis of DWP, Family Resources Survey; NHS England, Mental Health of Children and Young People in England; DfE, Special educational needs in England; DfE, Pupil absence in schools in England.

These indicators matter for policy makers interested in the future NEETs outlook, since there is ample evidence that children who are disabled or have poor health (including poor mental health)²⁸, children with special educational needs (SEN) support²⁹, and children who have high rates of school absence all have an elevated risk of becoming NEET in young adulthood.³⁰

2. The impact of some Government policy changes looks to have worsened young people's labour market opportunities

Alongside the gradual increase in NEET risk indicators over recent years, emerging evidence suggests that Government policy has worsened young people's labour market opportunities in the past year. Specifically, the increase in employer National Insurance contributions (NICs), combined with the bumper rise in the minimum wage, meant that labour costs rose especially quickly in sectors like hospitality, where young people are concentrated. In addition, the extra-fast increase in youth minimum wage rates has pushed up labour costs for the youngest workers aged 16-20.

²⁸ National Centre for Social Research, *Risk factors for being NEET among young people*, December 2023.

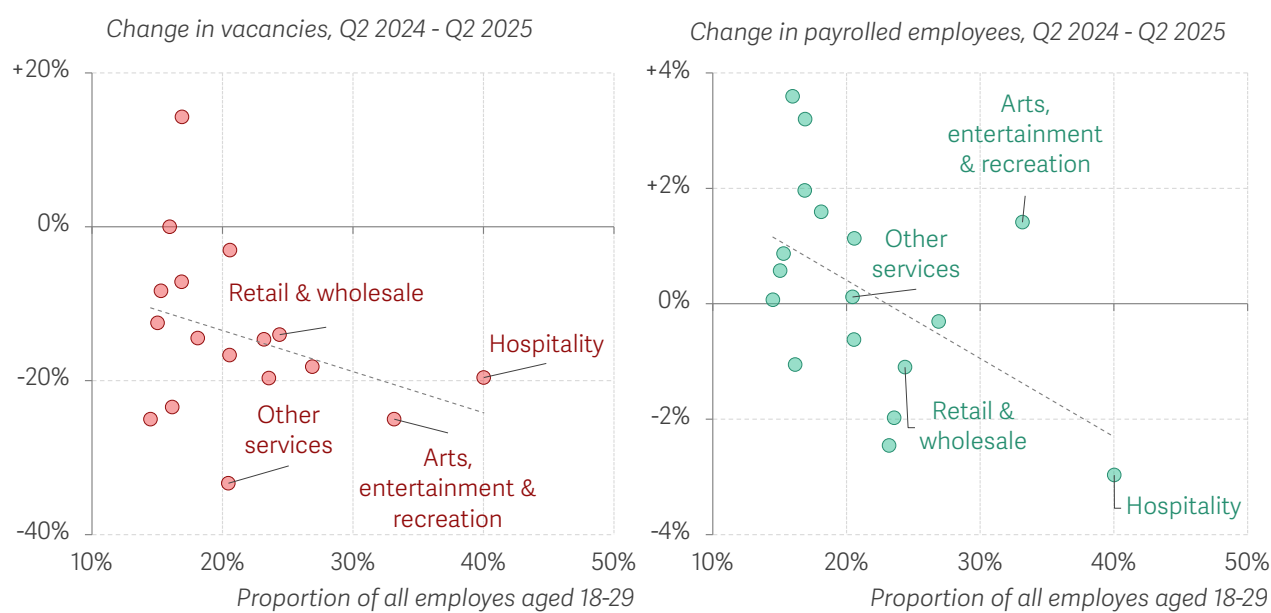
²⁹ See, for example: E Latimer, L Sibietta & D Snape, *Support for children with disabilities and special educational needs*, IFS, October 2025; A Baloch, *Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage*, Impetus, May 2025.

³⁰ See, for example: J Madia et al, *Long-term labour market and economic consequences of school exclusions in England: Evidence from two counterfactual approaches*, British Journal of Educational Psychology, Volume 92, Issue 3, February 2022; J Dräger, M Klein & E Sosu, *The long-term consequences of early school absences for educational attainment and labour market outcomes*, British Educational Research Journal, Volume 50, Issue 4, February 2024; A Joseph & W Crenna-Jennings, *Early adult outcomes for suspended and excluded pupils*, Education Policy Institute, August 2024; A Joseph & W Crenna-Jennings, *Outcomes for young people who experience multiple suspensions*, Education Policy Institute, March 2024.

For workers aged 16-21, the NICs changes had no impact (employers do not have to pay NICs on the earnings of these workers), but their labour costs were increased by large increases to the 16-17 and 18-20 minimum wage rates. On the other hand, workers aged 21-24 were affected by both the larger-than-expected increase to the adult minimum wage rate and the increase to employer NICs (neither of these are specific to 21-24-year-olds, but had a slightly greater impact on 21-24-year-olds than adults aged 25+ because young people tend to receive lower wages on average). Overall, these policy changes raised labour costs (over and above expected economy-wide earnings growth) by 5.4 per cent for 16-20-year-olds and 3.4 per cent for 21-24-year-olds, compared to 3.3 per cent across the economy as a whole.³¹ This now looks to be having an impact on the labour market, with a stall in hiring showing up in a fall in both vacancies and employment that is most pronounced in youth-heavy sectors like retail and hospitality (see Figure 12).

FIGURE 12: Falls in vacancies and employment over the past year are most pronounced in youth-heavy sectors

Change in vacancies (left) and payrolled employees (right) by industry between Q2 2024 and 2025 (vertical axis) and the proportion of all employees aged 18-29 (horizontal axis): UK



SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) Table 4.1a; ONS, VACS02: Vacancies by industry; ONS/HMRC, Earnings and employment from Pay As You Earn Real Time Information.

For example, while the total number of vacancies fell by 17 per cent between spring 2024 and spring 2025, this rises to 20 per cent in the hospitality sector and 25 per cent in the arts, entertainment and recreation sector (both of which employ a greater-than-average share of young people). Similarly, while payrolled employment fell by 0.3 per cent across

³¹ N Cominetti & G Thwaites, Minimum wage, maximum pressure? The impact of 2025's minimum wage and employer NICs increases, Resolution Foundation, March 2025.

the UK as a whole over the same 12-month period, employment in retail and wholesale fell by 1.1 per cent and in hospitality by 3.0 per cent. In fact, economy-wide payrolled employment has fallen by 104,000 between spring 2024 and 2025, but employment in these two sectors fell by even more (down by 113,000), while employment in some other sectors has actually increased.³²

Moreover, the cooling of the labour market is showing up as a slowdown in hiring rather than an increase in redundancies, which remain at normal levels.³³ This is bad news for young people looking for their first jobs – it seems that firms are holding on to their existing workers rather than taking on new (younger) ones.

Policy responses to reduce the number of NEETs must meet young people where they are

Addressing the challenge of young people who are NEET requires policy makers to first build a clear understanding of the evolving picture of worklessness among young people. While rising economic inactivity has been a main factor behind *recent* increases in NEET rates, unemployment remains a persistent challenge: by the spring of 2025, there were 365,000 young people aged 16-24 who were unemployed and 583,000 who were economically inactive. There are also notable differences between 16-17-year-olds and those aged 18 and above – suggesting that age-specific interventions may be necessary for the current Government to succeed in reducing the number of NEETs. And with upward pressures on NEET numbers expected in the coming years, policy makers need to focus not just on improving the current picture, but also on preventing it from getting worse.

Reducing the number of NEETs might seem ambitious, but insights from abroad and from the UK's own past offer reasons for optimism.

First, looking internationally we can draw lessons from both countries with remarkably low NEET rates, and from countries that have experienced rapid progress over the last decade. As we can see in Figure 13, 15 per cent of 18-24-year-olds were estimated to be NEET in 2024 in the UK – more than double the rate in the Netherlands and Norway (where NEET rates are 5 and 7 per cent respectively). The UK NEET rate is also now above the EU average of 12 per cent. Meanwhile, we only have to look to Ireland to see

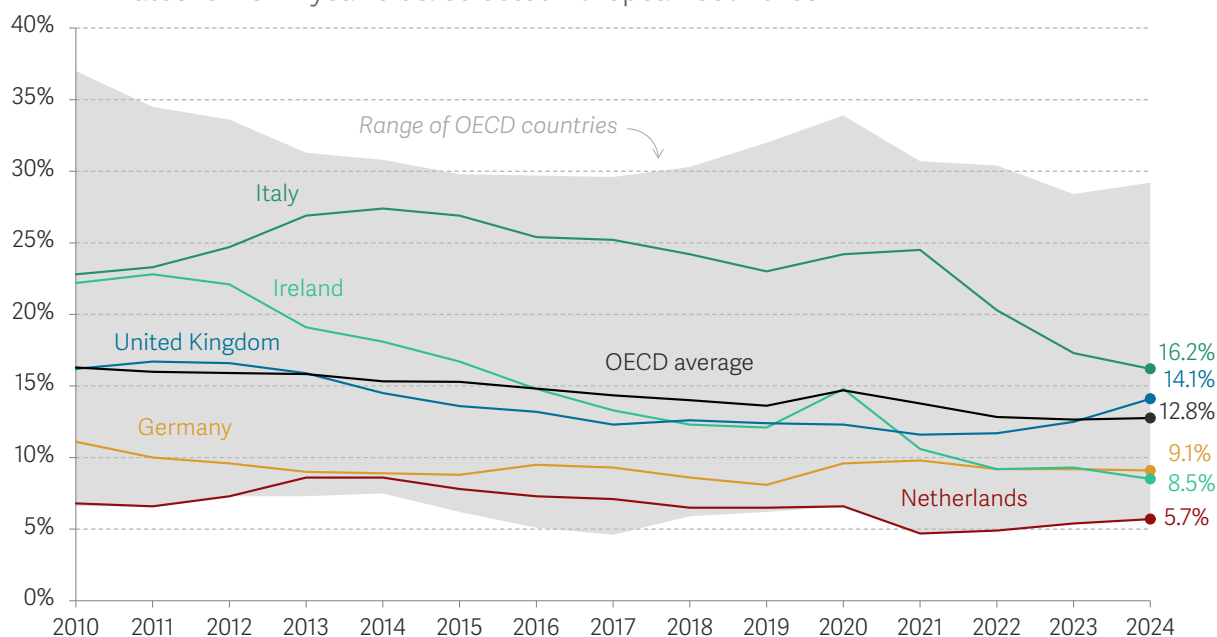
³² Unfortunately, there is no available data on the number of payrolled employment by age and sector, to see how much of this fall in employment in retail and wholesale and hospitality has been among young people. We submitted a FOI request to HMRC for this breakdown of PAYE data, but were told it could not be provided within the FOIA cost limit, since “providing this data would require the location, extraction and processing of over 10 years of PAYE RTI data for the entire Payrolled Employee population.” This suggests that, surprisingly, this PAYE data breakdown is not being used within Government. We would encourage the Government to consider how it stores and analyses its PAYE data so that this rich data set can be used to analyse the impact of future policy changes. However, it is clear that any fall in employment in these two sectors will have a large impact on young people. For example, in July 2025, more than a third (36 per cent) of payrolled employees in the hospitality sector were aged under 25. Source: RF analysis of FOI2025/144314; FOI2025/153432.

³³ ONS, [Advance notice of potential redundancies](#), October 2025; ONS, [ILO redundancy rate](#), October 2025.

an example of a country who has made notable improvements to its NEET rate: it had a NEET problem even greater than the UK's in the aftermath of the financial crisis, when almost one-in-four (24 per cent) of young Irish adults were NEET. But by 2024, its NEET rate had fallen by more than half, to just 8 per cent.³⁴

FIGURE 13: The UK's NEET rate is now higher than the European average

NEET rates for 18-24-year-olds: selected European countries



SOURCE: RF analysis of Eurostat, Young persons neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET rates); ONS, Not in Education, Employment or Training ('NEET') data.

Second, the UK has successfully reduced its NEET rate in recent history. The UK had around a million NEETs throughout much of the late 2000s, before NEET levels peaked at over 1.2 million in the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2011. By the eve of the pandemic in early 2020, things had improved considerably: NEET levels had fallen by over a third (36 per cent) to reach a pre-pandemic low of 800,000.

So it's clear we're not in an unprecedented situation: the UK had more than a million NEETs in the early 2010s, but this was followed by a welcome and rapid decline. It is important that policy makers learn from this success while remaining clear-eyed about the nature of the NEETs problem the UK faces in 2025.

We set out our recommendations for policy makers in the remainder of this note.

Reducing NEET rates in the UK will require a nuanced approach, focusing on the specific challenges facing different age groups.³⁵

³⁴ For a discussion of NEET trends in Ireland, see: D Lawlor, *Youth unemployment rates*, L&RS Note, August 2021; E Kelly et al, *Baseline Study on Impact of Youth Employment Policies*, Cowork4Youth, July 2022.

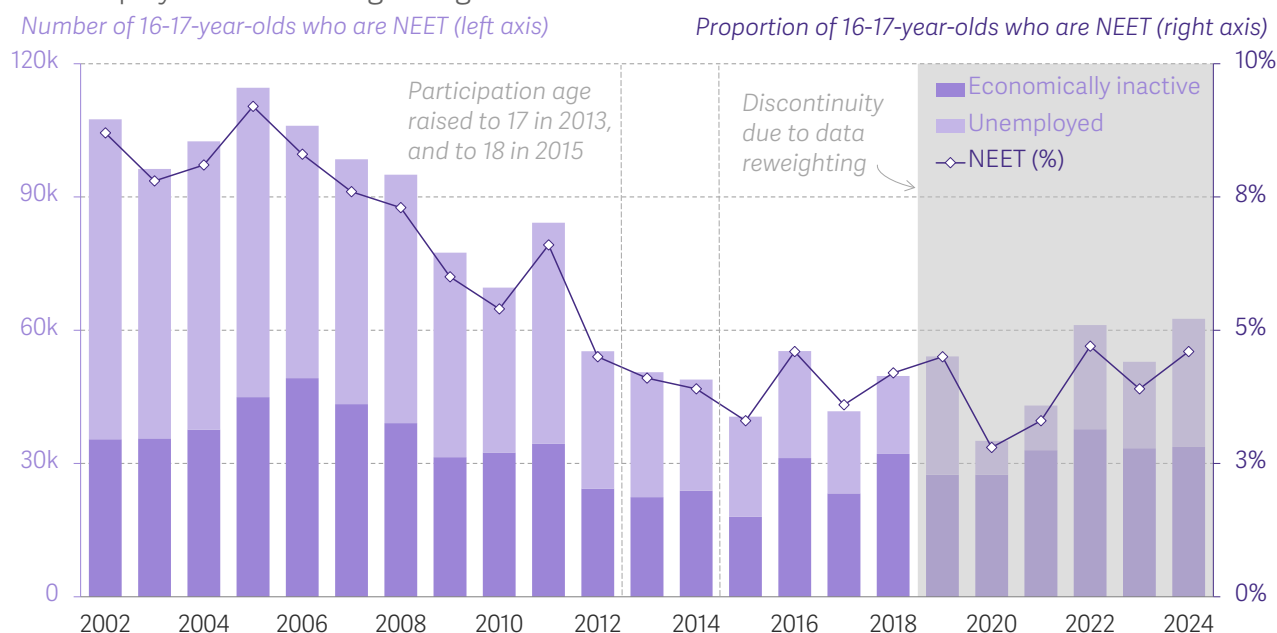
³⁵ Although the recent reorganisation of DWP – moving part of the skills brief from DfE to DWP – has the potential to make parts of the NEETs strategy easier to execute, there is also a risk that 16-17-year-olds fall through the net as more focus is placed on 18-24 (or 18-21) year-olds.

For 16-17-year-olds, mandatory participation must be better enforced

While the under-representation of 16-17-year-olds among NEETs (they make up 8 per cent of NEETs compared to 22 per cent of the youth population) may appear to reflect the impact of the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) in keeping more young people in education, this is not the full story.³⁶ Indeed, a higher share of 16-17-year-olds are in full-time education today than two decades ago: in 2005, 75 per cent were in full-time education, compared to 86 per cent in 2025. However, as Figure 7 shows, while NEET rates among this group reduced by 4.2 percentage points (from 8.7 to 4.5 per cent) between 2002 and 2012, progress has largely stalled since the RPA, remaining around 4 to 5 per cent between 2013 (when the first RPA was implemented) and 2025.³⁷ By 2025, there are 75,000 16-17-year-olds out of work or study in the UK. At the same time, Figure 8 highlighted that this group is increasingly moving towards forms of inactivity unrelated to health problems or care responsibilities. Since the mandatory education age was increased, they are also no more likely to be in education, but far less likely to be looking for work.

FIGURE 14: Progress in reducing the NEET rate among 16-17-year-olds in England has stalled despite the raising of the participation age

Number (left) and proportion (right) of 16-17-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training in England



SOURCE: RF analysis of DfE, NEET and NET Estimates from the LFS.

³⁶ The RPA legislation applies to England only – as such, we refer to NEET figures for England only in this section.

³⁷ The RPA was implemented in two stages, first to age 17 in 2013, and then to age 18 in 2015.

Evidence consistently shows that remaining in education through these ages is critical for young people's long-term outcomes.³⁸ It is also a point at which young people face a major decision between continuing in academic education or pursuing a vocational route; a choice that can be particularly daunting for those with limited guidance or family support around them.³⁹ This transition can therefore be a vulnerable moment, with some young people falling out of education or training altogether. Ensuring support through these ages therefore becomes ever more important to keeping them on track.

Following the RPA to 17 years in 2013, and to 18 years in 2015, the legal duty to remain in education or training lies with the young person – not their parents. But other stakeholders also play critical roles in keeping young people engaged. The framework set out by the Department for Education (DfE) places a legal duty on education providers, such as schools and colleges, to promote participation through regular attendance, monitor engagement, and notify local authorities when a young person drops out before their 18th birthday. Local authorities are then responsible for tracking, contacting and supporting these young people to re-engage, including by securing suitable education or training opportunities. The responsibility and accountability for keeping young people engaged therefore lies with local authorities.⁴⁰ However, the extent to which these duties are met is weakly monitored and enforced, with virtually no formal repercussions for local authorities that fall short of meeting their duties.⁴¹

Despite these statutory duties, NEET rates for 16-17-year-olds vary strikingly across local authorities in England (Figure 15). For example, the proportion of 16-17-year-olds who are NEET or 'not known' to the local authority vary from as low as 1 per cent in Barnet and 1.6 per cent in Ealing, to over 10 per cent in six local areas – including 15.1 per cent in Northumberland, and the steepest rate of 21.5 per cent in Dudley. While local labour market conditions vary, the ability of local authorities to enforce the mandatory participation age should not.

³⁸ S Machin, S McNally & Ruiz-Valenzuela, Entry through the narrow door: The costs of just failing high stakes exams, *Journal of Public Economic*, Volume 190, October 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104224>; C McCurdy & L Murphy, *We've only just begun: Action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment*, Resolution Foundation, February 2024.

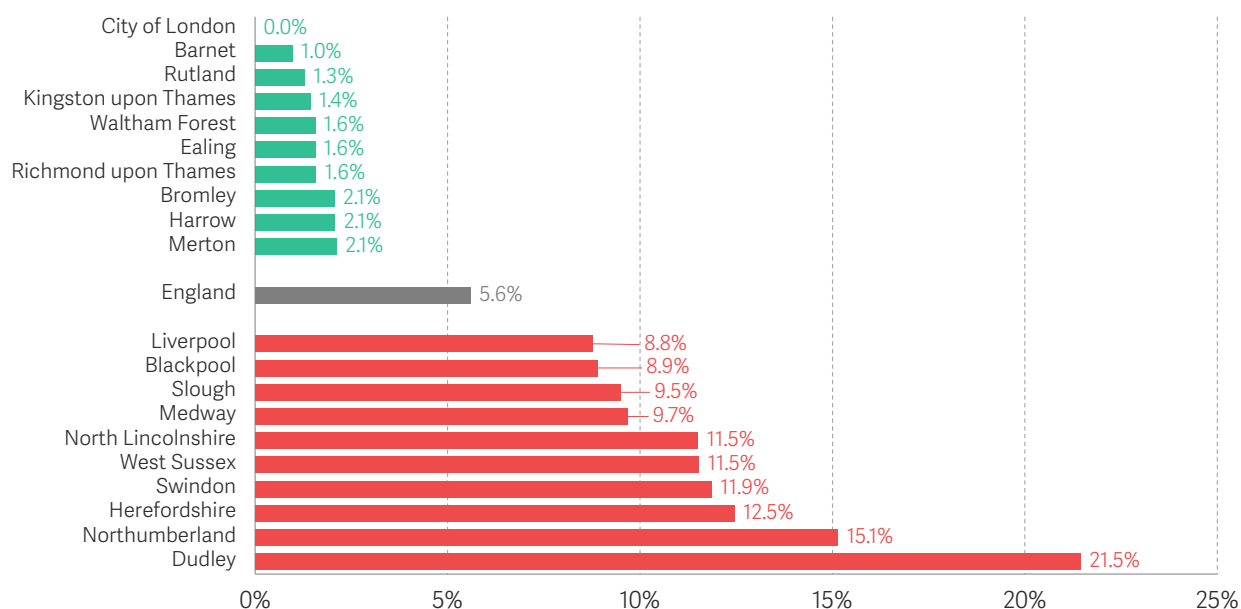
³⁹ Young people can choose between continuing full-time education, going into full-time employment or volunteering combined with part-time study or training, and undertaking apprenticeships, traineeships or supported internships. See Department for Education, *Participation of young people in education, employment or training: Statutory guidance for local authorities*, April 2024.

⁴⁰ Department for Education, *Participation of young people in education, employment or training: Statutory guidance for local authorities*, April 2024.

⁴¹ M Dickson et al., *Keeping young people in learning until the age of 18 – does it work? Evidence from the Raising of the Participation (RPA) in England*, July 2025.

FIGURE 15: The proportion of 16-17-year-olds who are NEET or 'not known' to their local authority vary considerably across England

Proportion of 16-17-year-olds who are NEET or 'not known', in England and for top 10 and bottom 10 local authorities: England, 2025



SOURCE: RF analysis of DfE, Participation in education, training and NEET age 16 to 17 by local authority.

Reducing NEET rates among 16-17-year-olds requires action on both retention in education and re-engagement of those who fall out of the system. A first step would be to establish a 'national front door' for young people seeking support. Although local authorities are responsible for contacting and supporting those who become, or are at risk of becoming, NEET, they are rarely an obvious or accessible point of contact for a teenager who has just left education. Weak tracking systems and limited provider follow-up mean that many young people are lost from view, becoming almost impossible to re-engage them.

A national front door, such as a single nation-wide website or phone line young people can reach out to that is embedded into schools' and colleges' systems, could offer a clear route for young people to ask for help and be referred directly to a named youth team within their local authority, who can then fulfil their duties. By providing simple and visible entry points, this initiative could remove a key barrier for those who lack information or guidance about where to turn when struggling to make decisions or at risk of disengaging from education entirely.

Alongside creating a national front door, policymakers should also address a longstanding and recurring issue in youth policy: imposing participation requirements without sufficient support. As discussed in previous Resolution Foundation work, the 2014 policy requiring young people to resit GCSEs resulted in very high resit but low

pass rates.⁴² The report identifies the main limitation of the policy to be the absence of support in helping students navigate the discouraging experience of failing and having to resit exams, leaving many, especially those aiming for vocational careers, feeling less likely to pursue further education or training.⁴³ This gap in support is particularly concerning given that our analysis shows young people with low qualification levels are far more likely to be NEET than their more qualified peers. To avoid repeating the pattern of obligation without adequate support, we recommend stronger academic and pastoral support for all young people who disengage from education or training.

Most importantly, given the responsibilities and accountability placed on local authorities and education providers, policymakers should focus on strengthening and enriching the tracking systems that underpin support to 16-17-year-olds who disengage from education. A recent report found that a key challenge preventing local authorities fulfilling their duty to young people, especially in tracking and identifying those who drop out, was data-sharing between schools, colleges and local authorities combined with generally limited funding for youth services.⁴⁴ Improving these systems first requires consistent collaboration and coordination between local authorities and providers, something already envisaged in the Government's *Get Britain Working White Paper*.⁴⁵ Establishing a common set of tools, protocols and systems that enable timely, standardised data sharing across all local authorities would help identify NEETs and those at risk much earlier, allowing faster re-engagement and preventing long-term worklessness.

Given the weak monitoring and enforcement of legal duties relating to young people, policymakers should also create and publish new indicators of local performance, such as how long it takes local authorities to track, contact, and offer suitable provision to young people once they are identified as NEET. This initiative would improve accountability and drive more consistent performance across local areas. Lessons can be learned from how duties placed on local authorities in adult social care are structured. In that system, an independent commission monitors local authority performance through inspections and ratings, with enforcement actions being taken when services are at risk. Given the long-term social and financial costs of young

⁴² C McCurdy & L Murphy, *We've only just begun: Action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment*, Resolution Foundation, February 2024.

⁴³ This has gained renewed relevance following the announcement by the Department for Education of new post-16 education reforms, which includes intermediate qualifications for student resitting GCSEs (see H Shearing, *New V-level courses to be brought in for students after GCSEs*, BBC, October 2025; P Wood, *White working-class pupils who fail English and maths GCSEs to benefit from extra help*, The Telegraph, October 2025). The decision to review, rather than scrap, the GCSE resit system is a welcomed recognition that the current approach is not working as intended. Maintaining a route to these qualifications for young people is crucial given the much higher NEET rates among those with lower qualifications.

⁴⁴ M Dickson et al., *Keeping young people in learning until the age of 18 – does it work? Evidence from the Raising of the Participation (RPA) in England*, July 2025; Local authorities are responsible for costs related to meeting their responsibilities from their overall budgets. See Department for Education, *Participation of young people in education, employment or training: Statutory guidance for local authorities*, April 2024.

⁴⁵ Department for Work and Pensions, HM Treasury and Department for Education, *Policy paper: Get Britain Working White Paper*, November 2024.

peoples' disengagement, ensuring that local authorities fulfil their duties should be treated with the same level of urgency and accountability as in adult social care.

For 18-24-year-olds, the Youth Guarantee should be bigger and bolder

Having set out policy recommendations to reduce the number of 16-17-year-olds who are NEET, we now turn to look at policy solutions that will help 18-24-year-olds. Since these young people are NEET for different reasons, successful policy solutions will look different too. And although the Government tends to design policy interventions focused just on young people aged 18-21, there is in fact a very similar NEETs issue for *all* young people aged 18-24. We therefore think that any credible policy response aimed at reducing NEET rates should consider 22-24-year-olds just as equally as 18-21-year-olds. We set out three areas of focus for policy makers below.

1. Broaden and strengthen the Youth Guarantee

The Government is well aware of the rising number of young people who are NEET, and has announced various policy responses during its time in office. The Labour Party manifesto included a commitment to support young people through a *Youth Guarantee*, guaranteeing "access to training, an apprenticeship, or support to find work for all 18- to 21-year-olds".⁴⁶ This was clarified in last autumn's *Get Britain Working White Paper* – the Government confirmed that, for the time being, the Guarantee would largely be comprised of existing entitlements and provisions such as the apprenticeship levy.⁴⁷ More promisingly, the Government has since then set up eight *Youth Guarantee Trailblazers* in mayoral authorities across England to test different ways to engage and support young people aged 18-21 who are NEET.⁴⁸ Most recently, at the Labour Party Conference 2025 the Chancellor announced a new strand to the *Youth Guarantee* by guaranteeing some long-term unemployed young people a paid work placement.⁴⁹ This policy action to help NEETs move into work is welcome, since we know that young people are far more likely to escape being NEET by moving into work than into study: 78 per cent of those who escape being NEET do so by moving into work and 5 per cent into a combination of work and study, compared to 17 per cent who do so by moving into study alone.⁵⁰

But we think the Government should be more ambitious. So far, all *Youth Guarantee* support is focused on 18-21-year-olds, and while details are scarce, at least some of the

⁴⁶ labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf, accessed 8 October 2025.

⁴⁷ Department for Work and Pensions, HM Treasury and Department for Education, *Policy paper: Get Britain Working White Paper*, November 2024.

⁴⁸ For more information on the eight Youth Guarantee Trailblazers, see: Department for Work and Pensions, *Press Release: Thousands more young people to get training and work support as Government extends £45 million scheme*, August 2025; G Williamson, *Where are the 8 Youth Guarantee Trailblazer Areas?*, Youth Employment UK, February 2025; Youth Futures Foundation, *Youth Guarantee trailblazers: what you need to know*, June 2025.

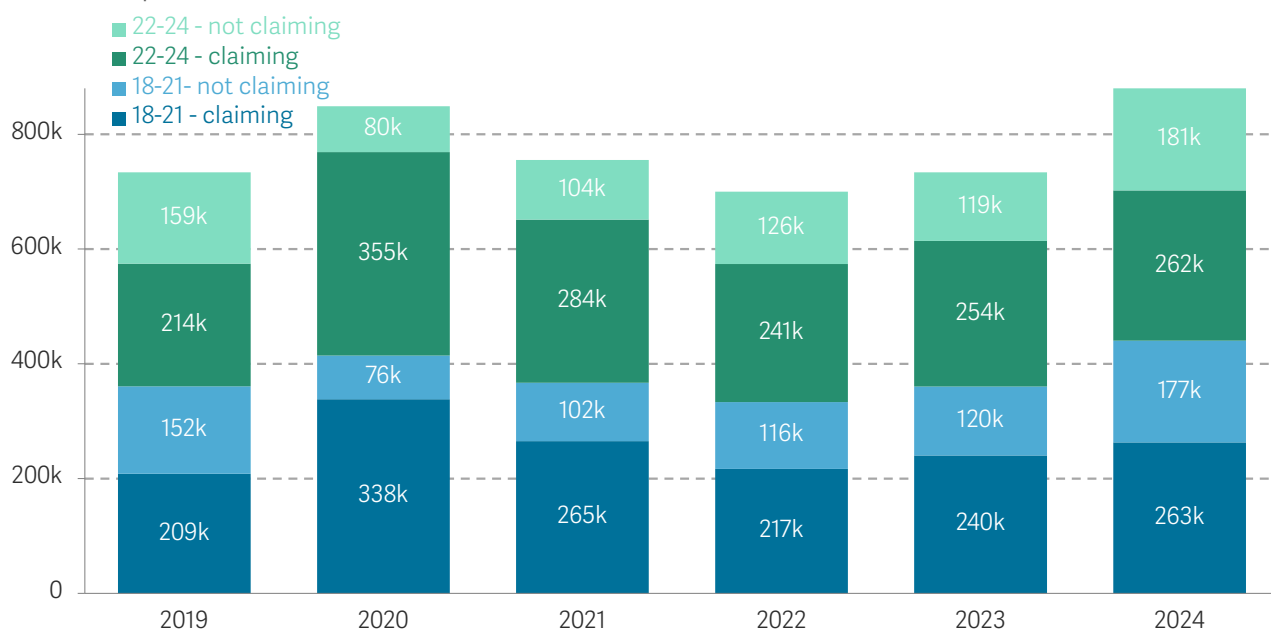
⁴⁹ HM Treasury, *News story: New youth guarantee for eligible young people and funding for libraries in all primary schools*, September 2025.

⁵⁰ RF analysis of ISER, Understanding Society.

support looks to be limited to young people who are claiming Universal Credit. We think it should be widened, to cover *all* 18-24-year-olds, regardless of whether they are claiming benefits. Of the 880,000 young people aged 18-24 who were NEET in 2024, limiting support just to those aged 18-21 would reduce the number eligible for support by half (to 440,000). Likewise, if aspects of the Youth Guarantee were offered only to young people receiving out-of-work benefits like Universal Credit, we estimate that this would again shrink the group eligible for support by around two-fifths (with 41 per cent of the group, or 358,000, not being eligible). If the Youth Guarantee is limited to just those young people who are 18-21 *and* claiming an out-of-work benefit, it would cover just 263,000 NEETs, less than a third (30 per cent) of the total NEET population. This is illustrated in Figure 16.

FIGURE 16: Widening the Youth Guarantee to cover all 18-24-year-olds would increase its coverage significantly

Estimated number of young people aged 16-24 who are NEET, by age and benefit receipt: UK



SOURCE: RF analysis of DWP, Stat-xplore; various administrative data sources (see Annex 1).

While expanding the scope of the Youth Guarantee in the ways we propose will undoubtedly increase its cost, this is money worth spending, given that the scarring impact that spells of worklessness can have on young people's futures – both on their health and their employment outcomes – can lead to greater public spending in the

long term.⁵¹ And now is a good time to implement additional employment support for young people: DWP should make the most of having secured a sizeable increase in funding for employment support over the rest of the decade – £2.2 billion of employment support spending between 2026-27 and 2029-30, with an extra £300 million announced this summer as part of an unsuccessful attempt to sweeten the Government's ill-fated PIP cuts.⁵² If the Government wants to spend these funds quickly effectively, it is hard to think of a better use than expanding the *Youth Guarantee* and providing more young people with support to enter work or study.⁵³ And costs are unlikely to be unmanageable: expanding support to those aged 22-24 is unlikely to result in a doubling of costs in the long run, since the support offered to young people aged 18-21 will reduce the future number of young people who are NEET when aged 22-24.

2. Re-think rushed changes to the benefits system

Rather than making headline-grabbing changes to health-related benefits for under-22s, the Government should pair a bigger and bolder Youth Guarantee with more meaningful reforms to out-of-work benefits that would actually reduce the number of NEETs. Back in March, the Government consulted on changing the eligibility criteria for UC-Health (the out-of-work benefit for those with sickness or disability) so that young people aged under 22 are no longer able to qualify, and more detail on the Government's plans is expected in the coming months.⁵⁴

But this is the wrong policy change focused on the wrong age group. It would be arbitrary and unfair to remove benefit support from a severely unwell young person who DWP judge as having work-limitations, but to keep paying support to someone in exactly the same situation who happens to be 5 – or 25 – years older. This sort of age-based restriction is not serious reform: it is a sticking-plaster measure that distracts from the deeper problems in the benefits system that affect people of all ages.

Even if policy makers were solely interested in reducing benefit spending for young people and cutting the number of NEETs, this approach is unlikely to succeed. There

⁵¹ For evidence that the benefits of such spending exceed the costs, see, for example: D Bell & D Blanchflower, *Young people and the Great Recession*, Oxford Review of Economic Policy, Volume 27, Issue 2, July 2011; M Strandh et al, *Unemployment and mental health scarring during the life course*, European Journal of Public Health, Volume 24, Issue 3, June 2014; A Schmillen & M Umkehrer, *The scars of youth: Effects of early-career unemployment on future unemployment experience*, International Labour Review 156, 2017; M Daly & L Delaney, *The scarring effect of unemployment throughout adulthood on psychological distress at age 50: Estimates controlling for early adulthood distress and childhood psychological factors*, Social Science & Medicine, Volume 80, March 2013.

⁵² data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2025-0432/DCL-Welfare_Reform.pdf, accessed 15 October 2025.

⁵³ For example, see the positive evaluation of the Sector-based Work Academy Programme (SWAP), which offered training and work experience to people receiving unemployment benefits. See: DWP, *Sector-based Work Academy Programme: A Quantitative Impact Assessment*, March 2025. We also know that the rates of return are higher for young people who undertake apprenticeships than for older people. See: S McIntosh & D Morris, *Labour market outcomes of older versus younger apprentices: A comparison of earnings differentials*, September 2018. If well-designed, employment support can also have positive mental health benefits. See: S Wang & A Coutts, *Can Active Labour Market Programmes Emulate the Mental Health Benefits of Regular Paid Employment? Longitudinal Evidence from the United Kingdom*, British Sociological Association Volume 35 Issue 3, October 2020.

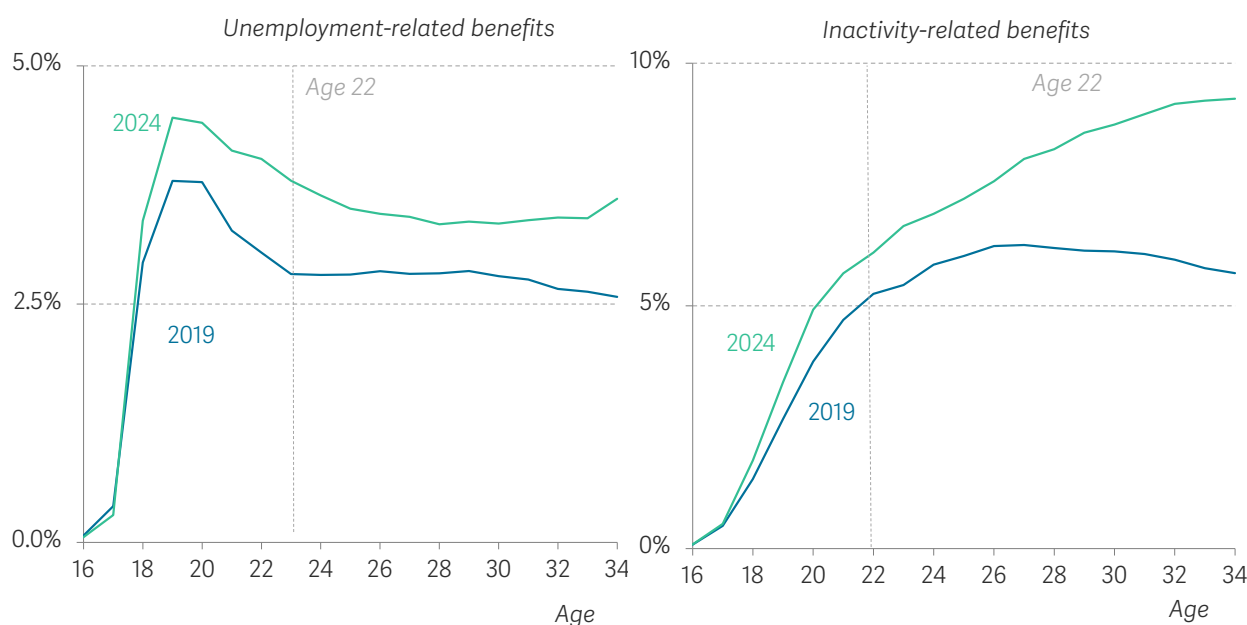
⁵⁴ Department for Work and Pensions, *Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper*, March 2025.

are 100,000 young people aged 16-21 claiming UC-Health, representing just one-in-ten NEETs. If UC-Health was removed from all of these young people, this would save just £375 million in 2025-26 – a tiny fraction of the overall health and disability spending.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the 120,000 22-24-year-olds claiming UC-Health, and the 230,000 young people aged 16-24 who are unemployed and claiming UC, would be unaffected by this policy change.

And as Figure 17 shows, it is hard to deny that the cut-off at age 22 is an arbitrary one. While claims for unemployment-related benefits are higher for those aged 18-21 than those aged 22-24, the opposite is true for inactivity-related benefits, including UC-Health. For example, in 2024, 4.9 per cent of young people aged 24 were in receipt of UC-Health, twice as many as those aged 19 (2.5 per cent). And since 2019, claims for incapacity benefits have increased more steeply for adults in their late 20s and 30s than for teenagers and those in their early 20s. If the Government's goal is to make a dent in incapacity benefit spending among younger adults, there is no good evidence to support the idea that curbing UC-Health for under-22s is the right way to go about it.

FIGURE 17: Young people aged 22 and over are just as likely to claim out-of-work benefits as those aged 16-21

Proportion of young people in receipt of unemployment-related benefits (left) and inactivity-related benefits (right), by single year of age: UK, 2019 and 2024



SOURCE: RF analysis of DWP, Stat-xplore; NOMIS, Population estimates - local authority based by single year of age.

⁵⁵ This estimate is worked out by multiplying the annual amount of the LCWRA element (£5079) by the number of 18-21-year-olds who get UC-Health and are in the LCWRA group (74,000). Source: RF analysis of DWP, Stat-xplore. For a discussion of wider health and disability benefits spending, see: L Murphy, [Delivering the undeliverable: Five principles to guide policy makers through reforming incapacity and disability benefits](#), Resolution Foundation, March 2025.

Instead of undertaking this arbitrary age-based restriction, the Government should have a positive ambition to make UC work better for *all* young people who are out of work, whether unemployed or economically inactive. To do so, it should take action on two fronts.

First, it should increase the quality and frequency of Work Capability Assessments (WCAs) for young people, to make sure that their benefit awards change if their health changes.⁵⁶ This would help young people get the right type of support as quickly as possible, preventing them from moving further away from the labour market. It is right that adults of any age receive support from the benefits system if they have a health condition or disability that makes it impossible to work – this fact is just as true for a 20-year-old as it is for a 50-year-old. But at present, the benefits system is too binary: most young people are deemed as needing no additional support to help them manage their health condition, or are judged as having a very severe health condition that means they are not expected to work at all. In reality, many young people will be somewhere in the middle. It is surprising that the overwhelming majority of young people are assessed having the most severe health needs and have no work requirements placed upon them: in 2025, more than four-in-five (83 per cent) of young people aged 16-24 who receive UC-Health and have been through a WCA are in the 'LCWRA' group (meaning they have no work search requirements), whereas just 17 per cent are in the 'LCW' group (where they are supported by a work coach to take steps to prepare for work). This is barely different to older people aged 25 and over, for whom 84 per cent are in the LCWRA group and 16 per cent are in the LCW group.⁵⁷ The Government should therefore review WCA outcomes to better understand why this is the case; the UC-Health system was not intended to have such a large fraction of people in the most severe category.⁵⁸

In addition, delays in carrying out WCAs mean that many young people will continue to receive UC-Health at the highest level – and have no work search support – even if their health improves. This means we are failing young people and leaving them without the support they need to enter work or study at such a crucial stage of life. The frequency of WCAs should be increased for young people – one per year, communicated as an “annual check up”, could be a sensible starting point – meaning that those who remain unwell can keep receiving the out-of-work support they are entitled to, while those whose health has improved can be offered work search support to move into work or study.

⁵⁶ In the long-term, the Government wishes to scrap Work Capability Assessments and create a new UC-Health system. But the philosophy of our recommendation still stands: young people who receive UC-Health should receive frequent ‘check-ups’ to ensure that their benefit award reflects their current health status.

⁵⁷ RF analysis of DWP, Stat-xplore.

⁵⁸ The proportion of WCAs that result in people being placed in the LCWRA group has increased considerably over time. See: L Murphy, *What the latest Universal Credit Health data tells us about benefit claims across Britain*, Resolution Foundation, September 2025.

Second, the Government should improve the benefits system for young people who are *unemployed*; we should not forget that there are more young people aged 16-24 claiming unemployment-related benefits than claiming UC-Health (at 233,000 and 222,000 respectively). At the moment, these young people receive almost identical job-search support to adults in their 40s and 50s who may already have a long career behind them. This is evidenced by the low proportion of young people moving from UC into work: among young people under 25 who received UC and were searching for work in 2024, just 8 per cent move into work each month, the same rate as among adults aged 25-39, and only slightly higher than adults in their 40s.⁵⁹ The Government's recently-announced work guarantee is a welcome development, since it recognises that some unemployed young people need intensive support to help them get a first step into the labour market. But this narrowly-focused, intensive support (which is expected to benefit just 43,000 young people who are long-term unemployed, the equivalent to just one-in-twenty NEETs⁶⁰) should be supplemented with more widely available support for young jobseekers. We propose the introduction of tailored, more intensive, job search support for all young unemployed people, to reduce the chance that they become long-term unemployed at such a crucial stage of life.

3. The Government should tread carefully with youth minimum wage policy

Finally, the Government should think carefully when implementing future labour market policy. As discussed earlier in this note, there is emerging evidence that last year's bumper increases to minimum wage rates, combined with the increase to Employer National Insurance Contributions (NICs), has worsened young people's labour market opportunities.

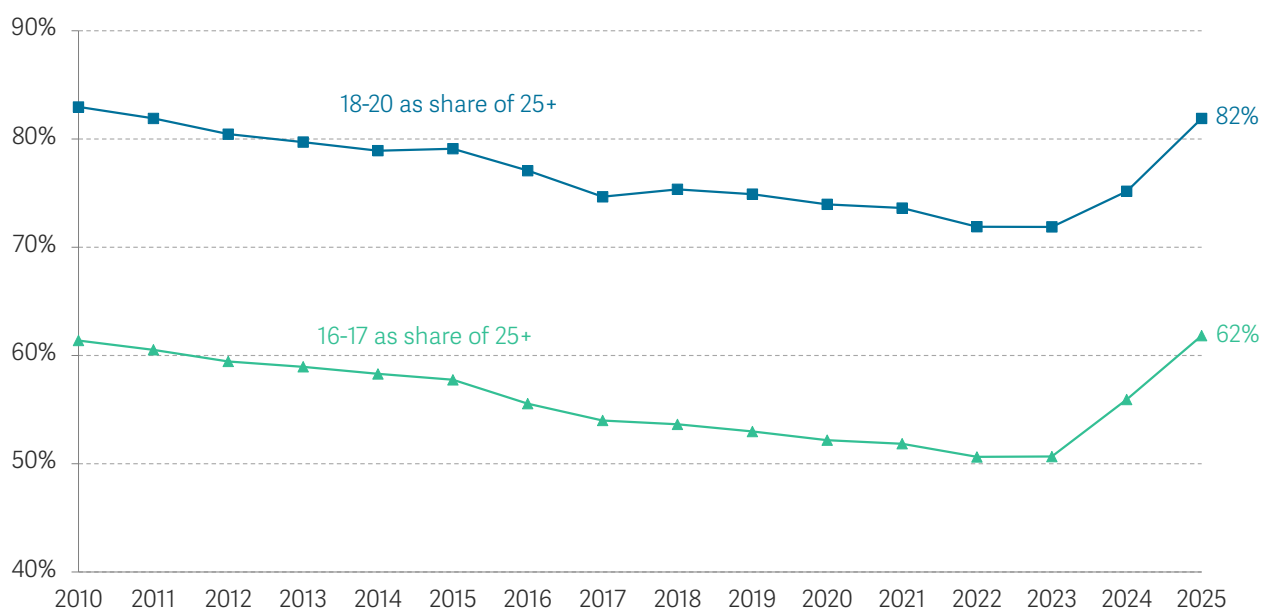
Last year, the minimum wage rate for 16-17-year-olds increased by 18 per cent and the rate for 18-20-year-olds increased by 16.3 per cent, compared to a much more modest rise of 6.7 per cent for adults aged 21 and over. As a result, the 18-20 minimum wage now stands at four-fifths (82 per cent) of the adult rate, while the 16-17 rate stands at three-fifths (62 per cent) – this is shown in Figure 18 below.

⁵⁹ RF analysis of DWP, [Get Britain Working White Paper: Analytical data tables](#), November 2024.

⁶⁰ RF analysis of DWP, Stat-xplore.

FIGURE 18: Youth minimum wages have increased rapidly in the past two years

Youth minimum wage rates as a proportion of the adult rate: UK



SOURCE: RF analysis of Low Pay Commission data.

We would urge the Government to progress slowly and carefully with further increases to youth minimum wage rates, weighing up youth minimum wage rises with potential disemployment effects. It is welcome that the Low Pay Commission (LPC) acknowledges the “emerging and concerning” labour market trends for young people, and is looking for “views on the future of the NMW youth rates, in particular the transition to an NLW for all workers aged 18 and over.”⁶¹

Our view is that abolishing so-called “discriminatory”⁶² youth rates would be ill-advised. This is especially true in the current economic environment. The risks of increasing youth minimum wage rates too quickly are large – as well as making employers more reticent to take on young workers, it could also make them less enthusiastic to engage with the Government in delivering its Youth Guarantee (for example by providing work placements). In general, we would urge the Government to approach its youth labour market strategy in a joined-up way, and avoid announcing further large increases to youth minimum wage rates that might make it more difficult to successfully deliver a Youth Guarantee.⁶³

⁶¹ Low Pay Commission, [LPC 2025 Uprating Report](#), March 2025; Low Pay Commission, [Low Pay Commission Remit 2025: National Living Wage and National Minimum Wage](#), August 2025.

⁶² GOV.UK, Press release: Government moves to end discriminatory age bands and unfair pay, August 2025.

⁶³ The same principle applies to the Government’s employment rights reforms: we would urge the Government to think in the round about the impact that, for example, a day one right to unfair dismissal would have on youth employment.

Conclusion

The number of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) has risen sharply in recent years, reaching around one million in 2025, reflecting both falling participation in the labour market and stalling participation in education. Although LFS survey data has its limitations, administrative sources confirm that the NEETs problem is real and growing.

Today's NEET population is increasingly characterised by economic inactivity rather than unemployment, with rising ill health and other forms of disengagement replacing the inactivity for caring reasons that was common the last time we had a NEETs problem in the UK. But those with low qualifications still have the highest risk of being NEET, meaning that young people will find it difficult to continue to higher levels of study or move into good jobs without support.

Worryingly, many of the factors that increase NEET risk – such as poor mental health and school absence – are becoming more common among children, while recent policy changes that have increased labour costs for employers may be worsening youth job prospects.

Tackling the NEET challenge will therefore require targeted and sustained policy interventions. Promisingly, the upcoming Budget looks set to include more details about – and funding for – the Government's Youth Guarantee. It is vital that the Youth Guarantee is not narrowly focused on 18-21-year-olds, or just on those NEETs who are claiming benefits. Instead, a wider NEETs policy is needed: one that properly enforces education or training participation among 16-17-year-olds, and offers all 18-24-year-olds, even those who are not claiming benefits, the support they need to move into good-quality work or study.

Annex 1: Rationale and methodology for calculating NEET levels using administrative data

In recent years, the Labour Force Survey (LFS) – the survey that sits behind the official ONS NEETs data – has come under scrutiny.⁶⁴ Sample sizes have fallen, leading to larger confidence intervals and increasing the risk of non-response bias – this is summarised in Box 2 below.

BOX 2: The Labour Force Survey faces well-known issues

There are well-known problems with the Labour Force Survey: declining LFS response rates, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, may have led to uncorrected changes in non-response bias, with employment trends in the LFS diverging significantly from those in payroll data and employer surveys since the pandemic.⁶⁵

These problems affect the NEET estimates, as shown in Figure 19. For 16-24-year-olds, LFS quarterly sample sizes fell by more than half between 2019 and 2023, from 7,800 to a low of just 3,300. Sample sizes have recovered since then, but remain below their pre-pandemic levels, reaching 5,500 in early 2025.

As a result of low sample sizes, the confidence intervals for the official

NEET estimates are large. In April-June 2025 there were an estimated 948,000 NEETs – but with 95 per cent confidence intervals of +/- 72,000. To put this in context, this is almost identical to the increase in NEETs between 2024 and 2025 implied by the LFS (+75,000) (see Figure 2).

But there is another reason to care about LFS sample sizes when it comes to young people: only a minority of survey responses for 16-24-year-olds come from young people themselves, with the majority being proxy responses from other adults (largely their parents), or imputed data from previous survey responses.⁶⁶ Indeed, in the first quarter of 2025, just 760 of the 5,500 survey responses (14 per cent) were from young people directly – a much lower proportion than for older adults.

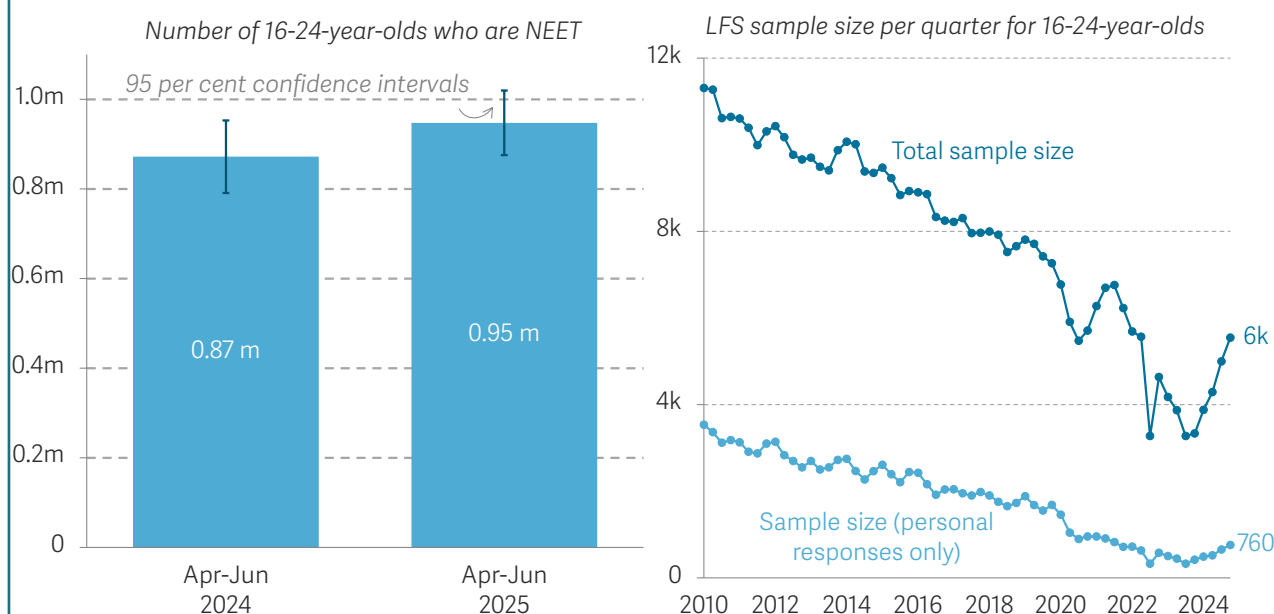
⁶⁴ For a thorough discussion of the problems with the Labour Force Survey and the impact these are having on the official labour market estimates, see: A Corlett, *Get Britain's Stats Working: Exploring alternatives to Labour Force Survey estimates*, Resolution Foundation, November 2024.

⁶⁵ See Figure 1 in: A Corlett & H Slaughter, *Measuring up?: Exploring data discrepancies in the Labour Force Survey*, Resolution Foundation, August 2024.

⁶⁶ The issue of proxy responses in the Labour Force Survey, including among young people, is discussed in more detail in forthcoming work by B Geiger & J Martin. See: B Geiger & J Martin, *Is the rise in sickness on the UK Labour Force Survey due to proxy responses or survey mode?*, ESCoE Conference on Economic Measurement 2025 – Contributed sessions, May 2025.

FIGURE 19: Labour Force Survey sample sizes have fallen sharply for young people aged 16-24

Number of 16-24-year-olds who are NEET, with confidence intervals (left) and LFS sample size per quarter for 16-24-year-olds (right): UK



NOTES: LFS sample sizes are unweighted, and include data that is 'brought forward'.

SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey; ONS, Not in Education, Employment or Training ('NEET') data.

Finally, there are additional reasons to think that the LFS might not be perfectly capturing *young people's* circumstances. Some groups of young people have lower-than-average coverage in the LFS, including young people who are renting in Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs). And importantly, young students are not

fully captured in the LFS, since people living in communal establishments (e.g. students living in halls of residence) are not surveyed. While students who have a parent living in the UK should, in theory, be picked up by their parents who answer on their behalf via a proxy response, students whose parents do not live in the UK will not be captured.

Given the uncertainty about the quality of the LFS in recent years, we have created an alternative NEETs series using administrative data sources to verify whether there really has been a sharp increase in the number of NEETs since the Covid-19 pandemic. We construct an alternative NEETs series using administrative data relating to the size of the 16-24 **population**, number of young people in **employment** and number of young people in **education and training**. A detailed methodology, including key assumptions, is set out below.

- **Population:** We follow the approach taken in previous Resolution Foundation work where we have estimated the UK employment rate using administrative data sources.⁶⁷ Up to 2022, we use the same 16-24 population for private households as in the published LFS employment (and NEET) datasets. Beyond this we grow these populations in line with the latest ONS mid-year population data for 2023 and 2024. This is more up to date than the LFS, which currently uses 2021-based population projections.
- **Employment:** Again, we follow the approach taken in previous Resolution Foundation work. Our crucial starting point for the number of workers is ONS/ HMRC Real Time Information (PAYE) data on the number of employees aged 16-24. To align more closely with LFS definitions, we subtract ONS estimates of workers who are not captured in the survey: 'temporary foreign workers', 'armed forces not living in private accommodation' and 'workers living in communal establishments'. For self-employment, our key numbers are from HMRC statistics. We deduct those people who have both self-employment and employment income, to avoid double counting. Beyond 2022-23 we use FOI numbers for growth in 2023-24 and – in the absence of any other solid data – assume no change beyond that. We use Annual Population Survey data to calculate the share of these self-employed workers who are aged 16-24. We straightforwardly add the LFS number of unpaid family workers and We add LFS estimates of those on 'Government supported training & employment programmes', but deduct a shifting proportion that we think will be in the PAYE data (e.g. on the Kickstart Scheme) to avoid double counting, based on receipt of pay in the LFS microdata. The combination of the steps above gives our total number of young people in employment.
- **Education and training:** We follow a similar approach for education and training, collating various data from DfE and HESA on the number of young people aged 16-24 who are in education or training. Where data is only available for England, we use ONS population data to scale this up to an estimate for the whole of the UK. To avoid double counting young people who are both in employment *and* education or training, we scale down the number of young people in education or training to an estimate for the number who are *only* in education or training. We use data from DfE on the employment status of students for 16-18-year-olds, and use data from the LFS on the overlap between work and study for 19-24-year-olds.
- **Calculating a NEET number:** To calculate a NEET number, we subtract the number of young people who are in employment, and the number who are estimated to be *only* in education or training, from the total population of young people aged 16-24.

⁶⁷ See: A Corlett, [Get Britain's Stats Working: Exploring alternatives to Labour Force Survey estimates](#), Resolution Foundation, November 2024; Resolution Foundation, [Estimates of UK employment](#), September 2025.

- **Key assumptions and adjustments:**

- We include a fixed number of 'ghosts' in our NEETs calculation, following the approach taken in previous Resolution Foundation work, to minimise the difference in overall NEET levels between our estimate and the LFS estimate before the pandemic. For example, these could be young people who are in education but that are not captured in the LFS. By including these 'ghost' young people, we reduce the level of our NEET estimate slightly, but it does not change the trend over time.
- As discussed, to avoid double counting young people who are both in employment and education and training, we use data from the LFS to estimate the level of overlap. This is a key assumption – if the overlap between work and study is bigger than implied by the LFS (with a higher proportion of young people working and studying at the same time), then the number of NEETs would be higher than we estimate. On the other hand, if the overlap is lower (and fewer young students are in employment), then the number of NEETs will be lower than we estimate.

Annex 2: Data citations

- Labour Force Survey (series page [here](#)):
 - Office for National Statistics. (2024). Labour Force Survey. [data series]. 11th Release. UK Data Service. SN: 2000026, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-Series-2000026>
- Understanding Society (series page [here](#)):
 - University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2024). Understanding Society. [data series]. 12th Release. UK Data Service. SN: 2000053, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-Series-2000053>

The Resolution Foundation is an independent think-tank dedicated to lifting living standards in the UK. We focus particularly on households with low and middle incomes; those on low pay or in precarious work; and those vulnerable to financial shocks. We also investigate fairness between the generations in our Intergenerational Centre.

We aim to provide rigorous analytical work, develop effective policy proposals, and use our expertise to affect direct change. We analyse the trends and outlook for living standards, including for different age groups, family types, and levels of household income and wealth, and seek to promote greater understanding of these. Our research focuses both on the specific areas of the economy that matter most for people's living standards, including work and housing; and on economic growth and productivity as the route to sustainably higher living standards. We also examine the role of government in improving living standards including through taxes, social security and public services.

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