Against the odds

Re-engaging young people in education, employment and training

A guide for councils’ overview and scrutiny function

July 2010
The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

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As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.
Introduction

This guidance is for members of scrutiny committees or panels and the officers who support them. It provides the framework for a scrutiny review of action taken to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). The questions in the framework are based on the findings of the Audit Commission study Against the Odds.

Against the Odds recommendations

Against the Odds aims to help councils and their partners take on their new responsibilities for 16-19 funding, challenge current activities and use resources effectively to tackle NEET levels. It recommends that councils and their local partners should:

- use their new responsibilities to remove waste and duplication and make their response to sustained NEET groups a core part of the local 16-19 strategy and funding plans;
- use information about the local NEET population and successful interventions to target services more effectively;
- develop a smooth transition from Connexions to adult employment services;
- work with schools to reduce the risk of young people becoming NEET and ensure successful transition at age 16;
- use the local economic assessment to strengthen links between economic development, regeneration and Connexions services to increase employment and apprenticeship opportunities for young people; and
- take the lead in encouraging the local creation of apprenticeships.

Why put this topic under scrutiny?

Being NEET at age 16-19 can have a negative impact on young people, their families, and communities. It is also costly to the public purse in the short, medium, and long term. There are links between being NEET and other social problems such as teenage pregnancy, crime and antisocial behaviour, and drug and alcohol use.

Tackling NEET levels is a local priority, with three-quarters of areas selecting national indicator 117 (Reducing the number of young people NEET) as one of their local area agreement targets.

Under current legislation, young people must remain in education, training or employment with training until the age of 17 from 2013, and until the age of 18 from 2015. There are risks that councils will not achieve this if:

- the number of local places in each of the four learning pathways (GCSEs and A levels, diplomas, apprenticeships and level 1 and foundation learning) does not match local demand;
there are no suitable choices for the most detached young people or those with the lowest-level qualifications; or
- employers do not create enough apprenticeship places.

From April 2010, responsibility for the funding and commissioning of 16-19 education transferred from the Learning and Skills Council to local authorities.

Factors that would indicate the need for scrutiny on this topic

A scrutiny exercise on this topic may be relevant for your area if:
- there is a risk of not meeting the LAA target on NEETs;
- NEET levels are not improving or have got worse;
- certain groups of young people have much higher NEET levels than others (for example teenage parents, care leavers or young offenders);
- there are high levels of 18-24 unemployment;
- the transfer of responsibility for 16-19 funding is resulting in a review of provision locally;
- decisions need to be taken about maintaining or reducing funding on services for young people aged 16-19 in light of public sector budget cuts; or
- you want to assess how well different partners in the area (for example schools, colleges, Jobcentre Plus and local businesses) are working together to tackle NEET levels.

As well as helping to assess progress on reducing national indicator 117 (reducing the number of young people NEET), a scrutiny exercise would also have direct relevance to:
- NI 45 - Young offenders engagement in suitable education, employment or training; and
- NI 148 - Care leavers in education, employment or training at age 19.

A scrutiny exercise may also give insights into progress on the following supporting indicators:
- NI 74 - Skills gap in workforce;
- NI 75 - GCSEs 5+ A*- C including English and maths (Key stage 4);
- NI 79 - Level 2 qualification by the age of 19;
- NI 80 - Level 3 qualification by the age of 19;
- NI 81 - Inequality gap in the achievement of a Level 3 qualification by the age of 19;
- NI 82 - Inequality gap in the achievement of a Level 2 qualification by the age of 19;
- NI 90 - Take-up of 14–19 learning diplomas;
- NI 91 - Participation rates of 17-year olds; and
- NI 106 - Young people from low-income backgrounds progressing to higher education.
Questions

Suggested scrutiny questions are divided into the following themes:

- understanding the NEET population;
- taking an area-based approach to reducing NEET levels;
- making commissioning decisions; and
- targeting and collaboration.

Depending on your local priorities and performance level for young people, you may want to focus the scrutiny exercise on one of the four themes listed above. Alternatively, you may want to include a few questions from each of the four themes. Questions within each theme are listed in priority order to help with this.

**Understanding the NEET population**

How comprehensive is the local analysis of NEET figures? How could it be improved and used to support decisions regarding higher-risk groups?

What are 18-24 unemployment levels locally? How do they compare with NEET figures? What are the reasons for any differences between the two figures? How is the local strategic partnership (LSP) using this information to target action to reduce youth unemployment levels?

What are your council and its partners doing to understand the differences in the NEET population, for example through ward profiles?

**Taking an area-based approach to reducing NEET levels**

How is your LSP leading and coordinating action to move young people into work and learning?

Are young people NEET being addressed as part of a wider economic strategy? How can council economic development and regeneration teams provide better support for children’s services when tackling youth unemployment and NEET levels?

How engaged are academies and local authority-maintained schools in their role in preventing young people becoming NEET? What action are children's trust partners taking to work with schools? Is sufficient focus given to supporting young people in the transition from primary to secondary school and again at age 16?

How effectively do partners work together to support young people making transitions to different services at age 18/19?

How is the LSP showing leadership by promoting the development of apprenticeships locally? How many apprenticeships have LSP members created? How does this compare with best practice?

What are partners doing to minimise the recession’s impact on youth unemployment and NEET levels?
How well do health services, social landlords and children’s centres support young people NEET? What are the LSP priorities for better coordination?

How well is the local chamber of commerce encouraging its members to provide apprenticeships and jobs with training? What support does the chamber need?

**Making commissioning decisions**
What evidence do commissioners have about the types of approach that are most effective in engaging young people? How could the evaluation of projects and interventions be improved?

How is local information used to support commissioning decisions? How do the views of young people inform commissioning decisions?

How cost effective are local actions? What are commissioners’ priorities for improving value for money?

How does the approach taken to reduce NEETs match the different needs of young people who are sustained NEET, and those who are short term? Is the approach regularly reviewed and adapted?

What actions are taken to ensure the support needs of young people NEET are met? Does any contact take place with young people once they progress into work or learning?

How well are providers’ performance targets linked to local circumstances and objectives? What can commissioners do to develop an intelligent commissioning model?

**Targeting and collaboration**
What action has the children’s trust and 14-19 partnership taken to clarify roles and responsibilities between Connexions and other agencies working with young people NEET or at risk of becoming NEET? How does your area ensure that young people are supported by the most appropriate agency? What more should be done?

How does the children’s trust review the level of resources put into universal and targeted support? How do they adapt this to fit the local NEET profile?

What action is the children’s trust and 14-19 partnership taking to decommission duplicate services and those that do not deliver value for money?

How does the children’s trust ensure that effective projects are sustainable?
What are your council and its partners doing to target resources on preventative and responsive activities to reduce NEET levels? To what extent are more generic funding streams (for example, Positive Activities for Young People) considered for use on NEET projects?

Evidence collection
When planning for scrutiny review, the following documents should help you understand what is happening locally:
- children and young peoples plan;
- 14-19 strategy;
- Connexions plan or strategy;
- NEET action plan or strategy; and
- local economic assessment.

Recent performance data from the local Connexions service should also help focus the issues to be addressed in scrutiny reviews. This should include:
- current and historical NEET levels;
- geographical variations in NEET levels;
- differences in NEET levels by age;
- the profile and characteristics of young people currently NEET;
- the profile and characteristics of young people who have been NEET for six months or more;
- proportion of young people in the sustained-NEET group compared to other groups; and
- proportion of young people NEET in at-risk groups (for example, young offenders, care leavers, young carers, teenage parents and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities).

When gathering evidence for scrutiny reviews on young people NEET, it may be helpful to invite the following representatives to attend a hearing to present evidence and respond to questions:
- Connexions Service;
- 14-19 partnership;
- children's trust; and
- local strategic partnership.

You may want to collect additional evidence from:
- Jobcentre Plus;
- economic development and regeneration teams;
- academies and local authority-maintained schools or schools forum representatives;
- colleges;
- youth service;
- youth offending service;
- leaving care team;
- teenage pregnancy service; and
- chamber of commerce.
It may also be useful to gain the views of young people themselves on issues such as:

- awareness of Connexions and other services to support young people NEET;
- views on the effectiveness of local services; or
- what they would like to see improved to help them move out of NEET status.

Data from existing feedback exercises from young people could be used to answer these questions. If your area carries out such exercises this could include:

- surveys carried out in schools;
- feedback surveys carried out by Connexions or the youth service; or
- one-off consultation events carried out by Connexions or the youth service.

Alternatively, you may need to carry out a specific consultation exercise to feed into the scrutiny review. Services such as Connexions, the youth service and voluntary sector projects already have skills in engaging and consulting with young people. Further guidance for local authorities along with practical examples and tools can be found in the Hear by Right standards on the National Youth Agency website [http://hbr.nya.org.uk](http://hbr.nya.org.uk).

**Conclusion**

Carrying out a scrutiny exercise on this topic will help identify priority areas for action, and identify areas for cost savings through reducing waste and duplication.

Alongside Against the Odds additional guidance has been produced on the website [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/neet](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/neet) to help areas take forward the recommendations in the study. Targeted briefings for practitioners will be available in July 2010 on the following themes:

- teenage parents;
- young offenders;
- care leavers;
- young carers; and
- young people with special educational needs.

From September 2010, the following guidance will also be available:

- local funding mapping tool; and
- tool for costing the local NEET cohort.
If you require a copy of this document in an alternative format or in a language other than English, please call: 0844 798 7070

If you require a printed copy of this document, please call: 0800 50 20 30 or email: ac-orders@audit-commission.gov.uk
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We welcome your feedback. If you have any comments on this report, are intending to implement any of the recommendations, or are planning to follow up any of the case studies, please email: nationalstudies@audit-commission.gov.uk