



Experiences of NEET Young People in the North East

HEADLINES FROM FOCUS GROUPS WITH YOUNG
PEOPLE NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR
TRAINING (NEET) IN THE NORTH EAST

September 2026

Produced for Education Development Trust

Summary

About the focus groups

In August 2026, Public First conducted two online focus groups with young people aged 17-23 who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and living in Sunderland and the surrounding area, for Education Development Trust. All young people who took part in the focus groups gave their consent for their experiences and quotes to be reported in this way. We are extremely grateful to the participants for sharing their stories.

Headlines

The focus groups revealed a set of 14 findings, grouped into three core themes. Here, we set out a summary of the headlines, with a more detailed look at the findings and quotes, below.

A. Why young people become NEET

1. Becoming NEET is rarely a failure of a young person's ambition or effort. It is a failure of the safety net around them failing to kick-in at the moment their plan is knocked off course.
2. Journeys to becoming NEET are all different, but a feeling that school or university "wasn't for me" is a recurring feature – even for those who become NEET at a later stage.
3. Negative early experiences of work are a common factor leading young people to become NEET and, in more extreme instances, these experiences impact how young people feel about working altogether.
4. A lack of understanding and support around neurodiversity and mental health conditions, such as anxiety, can both contribute to a young person becoming NEET and make them less willing to re-engage with education, employment, or training.
5. Faced with the reality of the jobs market, qualifications and the "traditional" university route have lost their shine.

B. Young people's experiences of being NEET

6. Young people are highly aware of the competition in the jobs market. They are pragmatic, not entitled.
7. NEET young people's experiences of education and the employment system are felt to compound disadvantage, rather than level it out.
8. The process of looking for opportunities is isolating and, for many NEETs, so too is life altogether.
9. Some young people are sceptical not of work itself, but of its value and purpose – particularly when it means working for someone else, with little room to "create", choose, or be treated well.
10. NEET young people are unlikely to reach for employment support, and even when they do, few can point to it being genuinely helpful.

C. What action young people would like to see from Government, employers and the education and employment support system

11. NEET young people want an education and training system that is more honest about the jobs that actually exist, and one that offers alternative pathways and a second chance when the 'traditional route' doesn't work out.
12. That also means an employment support system that properly prepares young people, including careers advice that's tailored to them and constructive feedback on applications.
13. The Government's approach cannot just be about reducing NEET numbers on paper. It must be about breaking a *cycle* of moving in and out of education or work.
14. Employers, of course, have a role to play in addressing the NEET crisis too. Right now, the recruitment and application process can be a demoralising cycle of rejection for young people.

To get in touch about these groups, please contact Holly Papworth: holly.papworth@publicfirst.co.uk

Findings in Detail

Part A. Why young people become NEET

1. Becoming NEET is rarely a failure of a young person's ambition or effort. It is a failure of the safety net around them failing to kick-in at the moment their plan is knocked off course. The young people in these focus groups had direction and were taking the necessary steps to realise that ambition, but each pinpointed a life event or series of events, often beyond their control, that derailed their plans. It was also at that moment that support fell away or was simply not apparent.



While I was at sixth form, I was planning on being an astrophysicist... but they didn't tell me until September that the computer science teacher just left, so I had to do BTEC PE, so that was already lower than what I needed... but I had to drop out for end of life care for my grandma.”

– Joshua, 21, Male, North Shields



Alongside college last year, I did a youth work qualification and I became a qualified youth worker, and there was meant to be the potential, because I turn 18 in October, so there was the potential for unit to do a level six apprenticeship of us being a late enrolment in the first term when I turned 18, but then nothing became of it. It just died off.” – Eli, 17, Male, Sunderland



When I left college, I signed up for the Army, but got rejected because of my medical records, so didn't really go nowhere.” – Owen, 17, Male, Sunderland

2. Journeys to becoming NEET are all different, but a feeling that school or university “wasn’t for me” is a recurring feature – even for those who become NEET at a later stage. This feeling was compounded by a sense that there was no alternative education pathway available, leaving them “stuck”. For some, being in a classroom setting was difficult or “boring”, but “more hands-on” opportunities that might have suited them better, like apprenticeships, were in too short supply.

“I was in sixth form the end of the last school year doing maths, English literature and psychology, and it just wasn't for me. I just didn't like the classroom setting. I wanted to be more hands-on, but apprenticeships are difficult to get into, difficult to find. Employers want people, especially for apprenticeships, people that are skilled and have the skills they need but won't give you an apprenticeship to build on the skills. So, you're kind of stuck in between where you either go to university and get a degree or you work without being in education to get skills to go into an apprenticeship.” – **Ethan**, 17, Male, Sunderland

“The reason I picked uniform services because I thought it'd be more practical in classroom, but it just wasn't, so it wasn't really for me.” – **Eli**, 17, Male, Sunderland

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I think my school pushed everyone to go to university. There wasn't really anyone who didn't, and it was all too much and unrealistic, I think. A lot of the people I know now who have graduated either don't have a job or are working in hospitality or just nothing to do with their degree.”

– **Hannah**, 23, Female, Northumberland

“At school, you were told to go to college, you were told to go to uni. At uni, you were told to get a placement. It was just more like a personal agenda of what they needed to box tick rather than actually, what does a one want to do?” – **Owen**, 22, Male, Sunderland

“I did maths, physics, chemistry A levels during COVID, and then I randomly decided to go to uni to do agriculture, which is farming and stuff. I left after a year and a half, two years, so I didn't finish my second year... I enjoyed the content. University wasn't right for me.” – **Hannah**, 23, Female, Northumberland

3. Negative early experiences of work are a common factor leading young people to become NEET and, in more extreme instances, these experiences impact how young people feel about working altogether. Young people described leaving employment situations of their own accord due to being overburdened or unsupported by their managers; due to promises not living up to expectations, or feeling out of their depth in challenging situations.

“ I was kind of promised to go up the company and it didn't happen. I just got given more and more work and people kept leaving and I just kept being given their work and I wasn't paid anymore, so I was on minimum wage doing everyone's work and it was just exhausting. I just had to leave to protect myself, I guess.” – **Hannah**, 23, Female, Northumberland

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My last job was three years ago, and it was in retail and it was just a temporary contract for Christmas, but I hated it and it kind of traumatised me... The environment was very - it was too much for me and it gave me a lot of anxiety so I couldn't handle it.”

– **Patricia**, 22, Female, North Tyneside

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I couldn't really turn it down because it was a lot of money in the city, corporate entry job. I thought I can't turn this down. But I went in and straight away it's just, I don't know, it was a bit crazy because I joined and then they started scaling back everything almost as soon as I joined. So, when I joined, I was told I would go to London for one week of every month of the first four months for training. When I joined, I got told, oh, that'll be on Zoom. There were just loads of similar instances to that really. So, when the targets started getting plummeted in as well, I just thought I can't really stay here because I feel like I'm working like perhaps a 40-year-old who's got loads of contacts and knowledge and I'm not. I'm like a nervous 21-year-old who just wants to get me foot on the door and chill out. So, I couldn't really stay where I was.” – **Owen**, 22, Male, Sunderland

4. A lack of understanding and support around neurodiversity and mental health conditions, such as anxiety, can both contribute to a young person becoming NEET and make them less willing to re-engage with education, employment, or training. This wasn't confined to just one part of the system; in focus groups, young people recounted instances when schools, colleges, universities, employers, and employment support providers all lacked the appropriate understanding.



I lost my ADHD meds just before going in [to sixth form], and they were like, 'Well, we can't offer you any support because you did well in your GCSEs.' And I was like, 'Yeah, I did well because I had my ADHD meds.'"

– Joshua, 21, Male, North Shields



They're [Jobcentre] just not very understanding at all. I told them exactly what I was looking for, and especially after my health thing, I didn't want to go back to retail and they tried to put me back to retail, so they did not give me the help I needed. And because it's been so long from being in work, I'm just sure that if I got the help that I needed, I would be in work by now... I was actually supposed to get an advisor that understood health issues and stuff, and I got a normal one, so she just did not understand what I needed and what I wanted." – Patricia, 22, Female, North Tyneside



I got an apprenticeship in accounting, and I was there for two years, and I left in April. So, I have ADHD and autism, and they weren't really accommodating, and I ended up doing my manager's job as well whilst he had kind of checked out, but nobody believed me, so it just got a bit too much... I think for me it was... a lack of understanding from management of neurodiversity and just human compassion and stuff." – Hannah, 23, Female, Northumberland

5. Faced with the reality of the jobs market, qualifications and the “traditional” university route have lost their shine. For these young people, grades and degrees increasingly looked like poor proxies for whether someone can actually do a job well, and university itself was felt to have been oversold as a guaranteed route to a good one.

“I went to university, just followed the traditional route of uni's the best thing to do. If you go to uni, you'll get a good job, and if you stick in and go to university, you'll be fine. So, I naturally followed that, but it's made no real difference really... I enjoyed it, but I just feel like what I actually got may have been useful 20 years ago.” – Owen, 22, Male, Sunderland

“In my experience with people that I know or people that I've seen work, someone could have all nines in their GCSEs and then A stars in the A levels. But when they get to work, once that book is away from them, they haven't got a clue what they're doing. But if you had someone that had just straight passed their GCSEs, just straight passed A levels or BTEC, whatever they did at college, they don't even need the book. They just look at the job and know what they're doing. But to employers, it's just a bit of paper that they look at, and they think, oh, well, that's better, but it never is... I think they're over-hyped.” – Eli, 17, Male, Sunderland

“I don't think intelligence is based on what grade you got in school or whatever.” – Olivia, 20, Female, Sunderland

Part B. Young people's experiences of being NEET

6. Young people are highly aware of the competition in the jobs market. They are pragmatic, not entitled. Many of these young people were prepared to take jobs they didn't necessarily want or felt their experience suited, but even that wasn't guaranteed to be enough. They were clear-eyed about the situation they found themselves in: competing in a saturated market, often against older, more experienced candidates, but rejected the idea that this reflected laziness or a lack of effort on their part. What would make the difference, they felt, would be an employer willing to take "a chance" on them.

“ I do still hear some people saying, "Oh, young people are lazy, they don't want to work." It's not the case at all. It's just there's not enough places that give you the chance. I've applied every single day to jobs.” – Olivia, 20, Female, Sunderland

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I just won't be the ideal employee, to be honest with you. There's going to be plenty more people who've done things in the times I've done nothing. I can accept that, but it's just unlucky.

– Owen, 17, Male, Sunderland

“ What gets me really, really frustrated is when they ask for a time period rather than actual experience... I've actually done more in two years than some people who've done that job will have done in five years, because I quite stupidly, looking back, put my hand up and said, "I'll do extra because I wanted to fill out my CV.” – Owen, 22, Male, Sunderland

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I mean, it doesn't make sense if you're a business owner and start picking absolute wild cards. But as a young person who, if you look at my results and stuff, I would be one of them wild cards. I just wish maybe someone would take the chance.”

– Eli, 17, Male, Sunderland

“ It's not that applying that's a problem, it's just you don't get the opportunity once you apply. It's easy to apply for jobs. There's plenty forms here to apply to. There's plenty of job applications to fill in. It's not a hard thing to do, it's just you don't get the opportunity after.” – Owen, 17, Male, Sunderland

7. Young people's experiences of education and the employment system are felt to compound disadvantage, rather than level it out. In school, this might have been teachers seemingly giving more attention to students who were already achieving. Now, applying for jobs, the requirements on job adverts felt stacked against them: age cut-offs with no clear reason, and 'entry-level' roles that ask for multiple years of experience. Underneath all of it sat a broader sense that opportunity depends more on *who* you know, than *what* you know.



I hate the quote, but it's true. It's not what you know it's who, and it does suck because that realistically shouldn't be the way the world works."

– Joshua, 21, Male, North Shields



Teachers just massively, they put all of their time and effort into the students that they classes gifted... that massively pushes down on you instead of the teacher giving you a hand." – Ethan, 17, Male, Sunderland



I've got a lot of friends who are just given jobs by their dads or parents and their connections. I'm not that sociable, so I wouldn't go out of my way to socialise, but I do agree that socialising does bring you opportunities, but I know that, but I just find that hard." – Hannah, 23, Female, Northumberland



Everywhere I've tried to apply, I have to be 18 and over, to be fair."

– Harry, 17, Male, Sunderland



I've been looking at jobs and even jobs that I wouldn't want to do... Something like a chef, minimum wage, and it requires three years' experience. I mean, I thought minimum wage was meant to be an entry job, but it's just ridiculous. I don't see how anybody who doesn't have experience could get a job." – Hannah, 23, Female, Northumberland



I've done loads of experience unpaid. I've got a qualification from our college and stuff, but I mean there's only so much experience I can do. I want a job now, to be honest." – Olivia, 20, Female, Sunderland

8. The process of looking for opportunities is isolating and, for many NEETs, so too is life **altogether**. Being NEET was described as having a real and ongoing impact on mental health, socially isolating and quietly demoralising. Several described a shrinking social life, and the same conversation of 'have you found anywhere yet' "chipping away" at them every time it came up.



My sister is about to go to medical school to be a doctor. And when we go out for a walk with the dog, just recently there's people that we bump into that my mom and dad know from walking the dog and they're like, "Oh, are you the one about to go to med school?" And I'm like, "No." They're like, "Oh, okay. What do you do?" I'm like, "Nothing." That seems to be how people describe themselves, their job. It's not what you're interested in or how kind you are or if you love animals, it's like people identify you by your job and it's hard... like I want to disappear."

– **Hannah**, 23, Female, Northumberland



So, after leaving work, it's been three years, like I said, and after that job, I had to take a year off looking for work because of anxiety. So, I only started looking for work at the start of last year, and it's just took a toll on finance a lot. Luckily, I live at home, but socially, I'm not in contact with my friends, so I don't really see them often. Maybe once a year." – **Patricia**, 22, Female, North Tyneside



It can be quite tedious in a way because you kind of think, oh, if I bump into five of my mates, if we're playing football, "You found anywhere yet?" "No, not yet. ""Are you looking?" "Yeah. Applied for a hundred jobs. "Have you heard anything back?" "No, not yet." I don't know, it kind of just chips away. And they're not doing it on purpose, it's just a part of but it does chip away at your pride a bit because you do think, "What am I doing wrong?" – **Owen**, 22, Male, Sunderland

9. Some young people are sceptical not of work itself, but of its value and purpose – particularly when it means working for someone else, with little room to “create”, choose, or be treated well. None of these young people were rejecting work outright, or even working for someone else, at least at the start of their career. But there was a sense that they would rather be working for themselves, or doing something seemingly more intrinsically valuable, further down the line.



Why would my dream be working for someone all my life and then dying? ... I know for the system you have to work to survive, but it's just a sad reality, to be honest... I don't know why humans are here, but I don't think we're meant to work for someone all our life and stuff.”

– Olivia, 20, Female, Sunderland



It's like I'll work from now until a certain age, but when I'm older, I just want to create. I don't want to be sat working in a job. I want to be creating my own sh*t, honing on my own skills.”

– Owen, 17, Male, Sunderland

10. NEET young people are unlikely to reach for employment support, and even when they do, few can point to it being genuinely helpful. For some, it was a question of awareness – they weren't sure what was available to them. For others, they had an expectation of being poorly understood by employment support staff or support being generic and, therefore, avoided it pre-emptively. And for those who had used it, the experience largely confirmed those fears: a 'tick-box' exercise that felt impersonal. The one exception was an employability programme for young people that worked because of the individual supporting them, not necessarily the effectiveness of the programme.



I don't think young people know it's [support at the Jobcentre] there.” Eli, 17, Male, Sunderland



I think I'd probably find it [going to the Jobcentre] too overwhelming. I don't know. Trying to explain to someone else, I don't know. I think I'd find it really overwhelming... they don't understand, so I think I'd find that really hard.” – Hannah, 23, Female, Northumberland



“The Jobcentre, in terms of that, I haven't been there yet. I just haven't heard good things about them, and I don't know if I'd come away from there feeling so rejected ... I don't know if that would actually step us back from where I am going there.” – Owen, 22, Male, Sunderland



They're [the Jobcentre] just not very understanding at all. I told them exactly what I was looking for, and especially after my health thing, I didn't want to go back to retail and they tried to put me back to retail, so they did not give me the help I needed. And because it's been so long from being in work, I'm just sure that if I got the help that I needed, I would be in work by now... I was actually supposed to get an advisor that understood health issues and stuff, and I got a normal one, so she just did not understand what I needed and what I wanted.”

– Patricia, 22, Female, North Tyneside



The woman I had for that [youth employability programme] was very nice, and she was down to earth and understood us and where we come from, and she'd have banter and stuff with us. But yeah, she spent a lot of time phoning around places for not just me, but other people in the group.” – Olivia, 20, Female, Sunderland

Part C. What action young people would like to see from Government, employers and the education and employment support system

11. Young people want an education and training system that is more honest about the jobs that actually exist, and one that offers alternative pathways and a second chance when the 'traditional route' doesn't work out. For some, that meant universities being upfront about employment outcomes, rather than filling courses for their own sake. For others, it was about the idea that once you're written off early, whether through low grades or a lack of teacher attention, there's little route back in. These changes were felt to be what would give young people a real chance at competing in the jobs market.

“ I think if universities perhaps put people before profits, I think would help massively. I think universities just cram as many people in as physically possible in courses that they'll never, ever, ever get a job in, but they're making loads of money... A lot of graduate jobs are 26, 27 grand a year, which isn't enough for some people to even start paying back their tuition fees. And it's only a couple thousand pound above minimum wage. So, I just think universities really, if they thought ahead of how many people are we actually needing, make sure they get jobs, would help massively rather than just how many blocks of nine and a half grand can we get from these younger generation coming through.” – Owen, 22, Male, Sunderland

“ Unless you're a gifted kid, the teacher didn't care about you. So my results aren't that. There were passes and stuff that weren't that great. And it's like you need a seven in English and you're seven in everything, which isn't what I've got and it's too late to change it now sort of thing.” – Eli, 17, Male, Sunderland

12. That also means an employment support system that properly prepares young people, including careers advice that's tailored to them and constructive feedback on applications. None of them described good quality careers advice at school – it was basic, generic and young people were pushed towards university. Now out of education and applying for jobs, if they did get feedback on applications at all, it was often too vague to help them improve.

“I find it absolutely pointless when I'm getting rejected and their saying things that there's too many applicants because it doesn't help us improve at all. It's a pointless thing to add in. When I get a rejection, I want something telling us what I've done wrong, how I can improve. I don't want something just saying, oh, there's too many fish in the barrel. I've picked a different one.” – **Owen**, 17, Male, Sunderland

“At school, you were told to go to college, you were told to go to uni. At uni, you were told to get a placement. It was just more like a personal agenda of what they needed to box tick rather than actually what does a one want to do?” – **Owen**, 22, Male, Sunderland

“I think my school pushed everyone to go to university. There wasn't really anyone who didn't, and it was all too much and unrealistic, I think.” – **Hannah**, 23, Female, Northumberland

“The school actually brought out a person from different types of careers, like a policeman, a health worker, a fireman, things like that, and they would talk to us about their career, and that was just not helpful at all. It was not personalised.” – **Patricia**, 22, Female, North Tyneside

13. The Government's approach cannot just be about reducing NEET numbers on paper. It must be about breaking a cycle of moving in and out of education or work. That means moving beyond an approach of finding a young person *any* job or *any* placement. Employment support needs to be tailored to the individual; work placements and volunteering need to feel like a genuine choice, and young people need opportunities with purpose behind them, fairly compensated. These young people are ready to work, and they're not being precious about it, but there are limits. They know their own worth and know when they're being offered a rough deal. Pushing them into anything isn't the same as genuinely supporting them into work, and it risks damaging their attitude to work altogether.

“I know beggars can't be choosers and all that, but some of the jobs I'm looking at, I'm like, I couldn't do this. I know Harry said earlier about having to do hands-on work, but there's so many and it's like, oh, this job's been found for you. And it's something that never in a million years would I ever picture myself doing, if you get what I mean? And it's not that I wouldn't give it a go, it's just I know I'd be miserable.” – Eli, 17, Male, Sunderland

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I know there's some politicians that want to introduce people on the Jobcentre to do voluntary work for a certain amount of hours a week, and it's these forceful things that they want that kind of push us away. And if they just introduce more choices instead of these forceful things, that would help me.”

– Patricia, 22, Female, North Tyneside

14. Employers, of course, have a role to play in addressing the NEET crisis too. Right now, the recruitment and application process can be a demoralising cycle of rejection for young people. Employers need to look again at their job advert criteria and recruitment processes. Requirements need to be more inclusive and stop wasting young people's time, closing adverts once they're actually closed, giving genuine feedback, and rethinking "years of experience" as a proxy for what someone can actually do. Age and years-of-experience requirements came up repeatedly as a barrier, even on roles young people considered "entry-level". And several felt that face-to-face contact, rather than defaulting to Zoom or an application black hole, would make the whole process feel less isolating and more human.

“ I hate putting myself down on a piece of paper. I hate talking about myself. I'd rather talk face-to-face with someone, and if I get into a meeting, I've never not got a job as soon as I've got an interview, but it's just getting the interview that sucks because there's just so many people wanting jobs and there's not enough of them.” – **Joshua**, 21, Male, North Shields

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Get rid of everything that's outdated. Most of the times I'll be looking for jobs and most the jobs that are outdated, overdue, and if I apply, there's not going to be an answer.” – **Owen**, 17, Male, Sunderland

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Having more of a face-to-face impact, because I think so many people, even if they had an interview, if you didn't get it, it would put your mind at rest. I've put some nice clothes on, I've got a nice fragrance on, I've done my hair, I've went out the house, gave it a crack, I haven't got it, so what? I've gave it a shot. But when you just apply, apply, apply, and you get nothing back, I think that's what really, really has set off a lot of almost like a mental health pandemic for young people because they can easily sit in the extra week doing a lot of worker search without actually ever speaking to anyone.” – **Owen**, 22, Male, Sunderland

